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15¢
OCTOBER

BLAST THAT GUN-GHOST DOWN!

by WALT COBURN

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NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE

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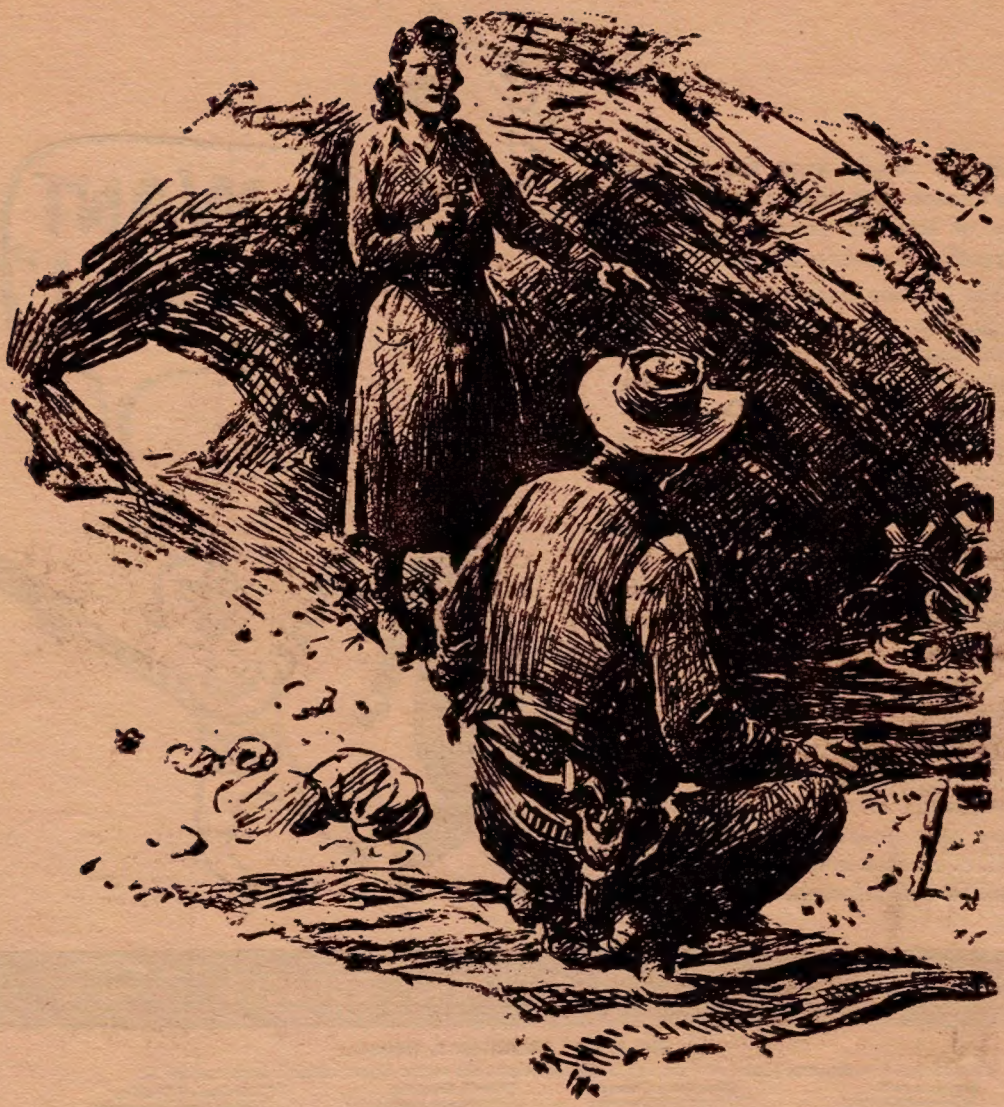
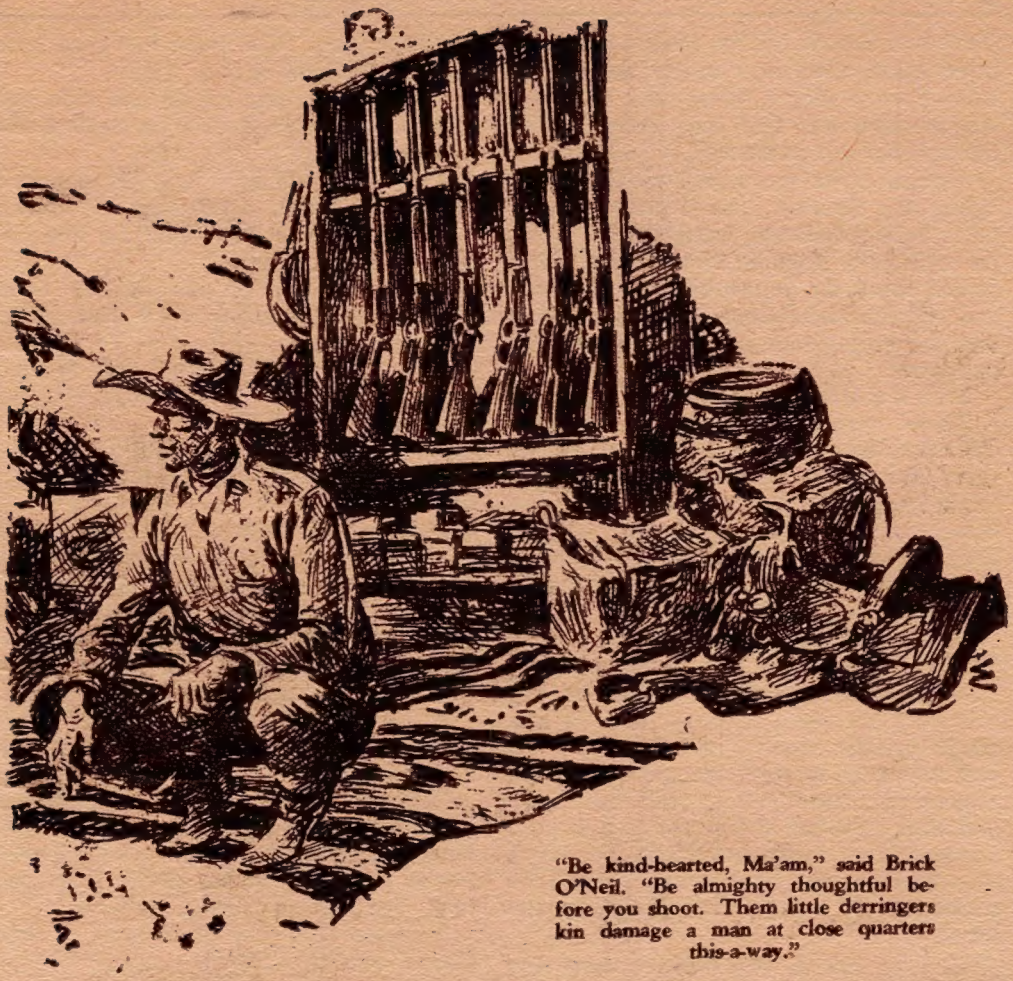


A Dramatic Novel of Border Outlaws

By

WALT COBURN

With his dead man's face and his dead man's name, he was safe at last from his pursuers' guns. And yet, because hatred for bushwhack murder lay deep in his secret soul, Dusty Rhodes tossed a sure-fire winner's hand into the discard, to play out, instead, the busted flush of a hated, hunted killer!



"Be kind-hearted, Ma'am," said Brick O'Neil. "Be almighty thoughtful before you shoot. Them little derringers kin damage a man at close quarters this-a-way."

Blast That Gun-Ghost Down!

CHAPTER ONE

Two of a Kind

WHEN A MAN is on the dodge he uses all the wolf cunning he's got to cover his tracks. Dusty Rhodes had put a thousand miles behind him and he was still cautious. Superstitious—that was Dusty's word for suspicious.

He had used up a whole month covering that distance—backtrailing, holing-up, watching. He'd even set traps for his pursuers. But there'd been nary sight nor sound of an enemy. Now he was still almighty cautious; his nerves were still taut. Dusty Rhodes grinned to himself; better to be superstitious than dead.

Dusty Rhodes had quit traveling by night and bushing up during the day. But even though he rode along in broad daylight he picked the dim

trails and stayed off the main roads. He never made camp until an hour after dark, even when it meant riding back to a spot where there was feed and water for his saddlehorse and packhorse.

Tonight there was a big lopsided moon riding the Arizona sky. He'd crossed a creek before sundown, watered, and ridden on until dark. Then he'd backtrailed. He'd jerked loose the squaw-hitch of the rope and slid his sweat-damp tarp covered bed and the greasy sack camp outfit from his packhorse.

That was when he heard the shots.

There were several shots all at once. Three or four guns, it sounded like. Sounds carry far and clear on a still Arizona night: might have come from a mile away. Then there was silence—ominous silence, freighted with danger. There is something about the sound of a shot at night that is base and cowardly.

"Bushwhackers." Dusty's voice was barely audible and it had a grittly sound.

He was moving swiftly before the dim echoes of the shots came to him. It was rough brushy country and he rolled his bed and tied it with the packrope. He shoved the bedroll along with his skillet and black coffeepot and greasy sack of grub behind a heavy manzanita brush. He hadn't unsaddled yet and he mounted and led his packhorse off a short distance behind the brush.

Then he waited. His saddle carbine was gripped in his hands. All his movements were quick and certain. Now he sat his horse, cold-nerved, and he waited.

Nobody had shot at him. The shooting he'd heard had nothing to do with Dusty Rhodes or with the ugly range war he'd run away from up in Wyoming. His best bet was to bush up and let it ride on.

Then he could hear the sounds of their coming in the night: shod hoofs, faint jingle of spurs, creaking of a new saddle, men's voices. They were coming towards him along the wagon trail that crossed the creek not fifty yards away.

The voices were too loud. Booze did that to a man's voice. Booze and the sheer relief that unscrews taut nerves when a dangerous and ugly job is done. Dusty recognized the symptoms. He'd just been run out of a Wyoming cow country where there had been too much nightriding and bushwhacking. Men there had used booze to thaw the chill in their guts.

". . . and the unsuspectin' son rode right into the gun trap! Reckon he knowed what hit 'im, Randy?"

"What the hell differ'nce does it make?" A voice snarled. "Whether he knowed what hit him, or who done the shootin'? Dusty Rhodes is dead."

Dusty stiffened in his saddle. *Dusty Rhodes.* The snarling voice had spoken his own name.

"What I mean, Randy," said the first voice, "I hope the son knowed who dry-gulched 'im."

"You talk too much, Kid. Gimme that bottle. Only reason we let you pack this was you wouldn't have the guts to go through with it sober. Only reason we let you come along was you knowed too much. Now if you run off at the head, it's your hide on the fence along with ourn. Unless you wanta die before you're twenty-one, Kid, you'll say nothin'. An' damn little of that." This was a third voice—flat-toned.

"I kin be closed-mouth, Clem."

"Kin you?" The fourth voice had a harsh nasal twang. "Gimme that bottle, Kid."

"What I told the Kid," sounded the flat-toned voice of Randy, "goes double for you, Kansas. Dusty Rhodes is dead. Nobody knows who stopped his clock. Talk outa turn, you won't live long."

"Sounds like you don't trust a man, Randy, you an' Clem."

"That's correct, Kansas," snarled Clem's voice. "We don't trust you. The Cooper Kid is just a mouthy, would-be tough button wants to be another Billy the Kid, mebby. But you're a no-good treacherous snake, Kansas. You hired out with your notched gun. Bigger money laid on the line kin hire you away. You're a yellow-bellied bushwhacker, Kansas."

"Bushwhacker?" the nasal voice whined. "What the hell does them two Blanchard brothers Clem an' Randy call theirselves? Next thing, you'll be tellin' me you wasn't there when the four of us shot Dusty Rhodes!"

"Kansas is gittin' smart all of a sudden, Randy," Clem's snarl had a chuckle in it. "You tell him, Randy."

"Whoever finds Dusty Rhodes," spoke the flat-voiced Randy, "will find no more than two bullet holes in his dead carcass."

"Meanin' what?" whined Kansas.

"Meanin'," said the flat-toned voice, "that the Blanchard boys shot high an' wide. There's no Blanchard bullets in the dead carcass of Dusty Rhodes."

"So when the Cooper Kid an' Kansas commence runnin' off at the head," snarled Clem Blanchard, "they'll be gittin' only theirselves into trouble."

"Clem an' Randy Blanchard," spoke the flat-toned Randy, "never left their Rail Seven range brandin' camp in the Apache Peaks. And here's where our trails split. Kansas and the Cooper Kid rides on to town to collect their hard-earned blood money. The Blanchard boys is far away at their Rail Seven range brandin' camp in the Apache Peaks. Come along, Clem."

From the black shadows behind the heavy manzanita thicket Dusty Rhodes Watched the four riders looming up plainly in the white moonlight. Dusty tagged each man.

The Cooper Kid was slim and towheaded and his big-mouthed grin showed buck teeth.

The man called Kansas was big and raw-boned and sat heavily in his saddle, riding a long stirrup. A stubble of dirty-looking sandy whiskers covered his lantern jaw. He had a big splayed nose and a twisted mouth.

Clem Blanchard was heavily built and short with black hair, wiry black whiskers, and beetling heavy black brows. He sat squarely in his saddle.

The flat-toned Randy was tall and well-made. His black hair was trimmed and a drooping black moustache hid the corners of a flat-lipped mouth. His black brows met above the bridge of his hawk-beaked nose. He rode with his weight in his left stirrup, with the hint of a swagger.

All four riders wore short faded blue denim brush jackets and brush scarred chaps. Their saddles were rigged with breast straps and their stirrups were covered with short tapaderos to protect a rider's boots from thorns and brush.

But there was something of the range dude in Randy Blanchard. His lean jaw was clean-shaven. The others looked slovenly.

In a flat-toned voice that sounded as if he were pronouncing their death sentence, Randy Blanchard told Kansas and the Cooper Kid to hit the trail for La Paz.

The Cooper Kid looked scared. Kansas whined a profane protest, but nevertheless hit the trail. The Cooper Kid, a sick look on his face, followed.

When they had disappeared from sight the two Blanchards headed back the way they had come, riding for the ragged Apache Peaks that stood like carved black cardboard against the moonlit Arizona sky.

NOT UNTIL they had been gone for five minutes did Dusty Rhodes relax his grip on his saddlegun. He shoved it into its saddle scabbard and wiped the cold sweat from the palms of his hands.

Then he put rawhide hobbles on the packhorse. He rode away into the night, headed in the direction from which the bushwhacker shots had come. He wanted a look at the dead man.

Superstitious, Dusty told himself. He was more than a little puzzled. Wyoming was a long, long way north of Arizona. It hardly seemed likely his enemies had set a guntrap for him here. They'd run him out of Wyoming. That's all they'd wanted to do. Either kill him or run him out of Wyoming.

Dusty had been more eager to run than to get shot down. He and his little two-bit outfit had been sucked unwillingly into the bloodstained range war. He'd wanted no part of it. He'd taken sides with neither warring faction. The cattle barons had branded him a cattle rustler and put his name on their cattlemen's blacklist.

When he'd refused to throw in with the little cow outfits, they'd called him a damned coward. Caught in the middle of that range war, Dusty Rhodes had pulled out.

They'd trailed him the first fifty-mebby-so-hundred miles. And they'd turned back when they were sure Dusty Rhodes was quitting Wyoming. So it didn't seem likely they'd bother to set a bushwhacker guntrap this far south.

A few minutes later he got his look at the dead man. He dismounted and squatted there on his hunkers and stared for a long time into the face.

Something disquieting stirred inside Dusty Rhodes. The dead face was the face of a man who could be his identical

twin. It sent a cold shiver threading along Dusty's spine. His scalp crawled. His grayblue eyes narrowed.

The dead man had Dusty's six-foot lean build; had dusty yellow hair; was blunt-jawed, short-nosed, wide-mouthed; had a square blunt face. From under the sun-bleached brows the glazed eyes looked blue-gray. Dusty had the spooky sensation of a man looking at his own murdered dead body.

Superstitious was the word for in now. No mistake. No josh.

A man has a surname Rhodes. Nine times out of ten somebody calls him Dusty. Dusty Rhodes. Dusty had run into two or three Dusty Rhodeses. But none of 'em had looked exactly like him. But *this* dead man!

There had been a first cousin. They'd grown up together as boys. Cousin Jake and he had looked alike as two peas in a pod. Until Jake's folks moved from Oklahoma to Texas the two boys had gone to school together and shared wild pranks by using each other's identity. The bewildered schoolmarm never knew which to blame, Jake Rhodes or his cousin Dusty.

This dead man could be Cousin Jake. The boys had been sixteen when they were separated. Jake had been tough and ornery and always in trouble. Jake had used Dusty's identity to get himself out of some nasty scraps. By the time they were separated, Dusty had commenced to hate Cousin Jake. Jake had known it and had gone to a lot of trouble to tar Dusty with a dirty black brush. Jake Rhodes had called himself Dusty, too.

But it was Dusty Rhodes' given name. His father had baptized him and christened him Dusty Rhodes. He'd claimed that was what the boy was bound to be nicknamed anyhow with that hair that had a yellow dust-powdered look.

Dusty Rhodes did some cold thinking as he squatted there beside the murdered man. He hated to go through a dead man's pockets, but if those pockets would produce anything to clear up this puzzle. . . .

The bushwhackers had shot their victim from his saddle. They had made certain he was dead. But they hadn't gone through his pockets. There was a jacknife and a vest pocket tally-book and stub of pencil. There were letters in frayed envelopes. Pinned to the dead man's undershirt, sodden sticky with drying blood, was a metal badge. A nickel-plated shield. On it was engraved: Deputy Sheriff.

The name on the envelope was Jake (Dusty) Rhodes. The dead man was Cousin Jake Rhodes.

A man who wears a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his understirt instead of wearing it outside is a man holding down a sneaky undercover job. That would be the sort of job Jake Rhodes would be good at.

Once, a long time ago, Dusty and his Cousin Jake had been good friends. Once when they were kids Cousin Jake had pulled Dusty out of a treacherous quicksand pocket. Dusty recalled that terrifying experience now. Even ornery Cousin Jake had deserved better than a bushwhacker murder death. Jake's gun was still there in its holster. He'd been shot in the back from the brush without a man's right to defend his life. He'd been murdered in cold blood.

Dusty had heard the bushwhackers describe the killing. Even tough, ornery Cousin Jake deserved a fighting chance for his taw. And then, too—there was that old saying about blood being thicker than water. . . .

DUSTY RHODES unpinned the blood-stained law badge and put it away in his pocket along with the letters and the tally book and the stub pencil and the jackknife. Then he gouged out a grave in the sandy ground and buried Cousin Jake. He dragged a big boulder into place over the grave with his saddlerope. Not even a close inspection would show that a man had been buried there.

The dead man's saddled horse was grazing not far away, its bridle reins trailing. The horse wore the Rail Seven brand on its left shoulder. It was a short-coupled quarter horse type strawberry roan gelding. The Rail Seven wasn't vented. Either Jake (Dusty) Rhodes had borrowed the Rail Seven roan gelding, or he'd been working for the Rail Seven and the roan was one of his string of saddlehorses.

The horses that Dusty had ridden had been 'borrowed' along his way. He turned them both loose. They'd head back for their home range.

Then he gouged out another grave. In

it he buried his bed and the warsack that held his spare clothes and his little camp outfit and his saddle and saddle blanket and bridle. He covered the buried cache

It was breaking dawn when Dusty finished. The dead man had been clean-shaven and had on a blue flannel shirt. In his deep chaps pocket there was a broken bottle of whiskey.

Dusty bathed in the creek and put on clean underwear and sox and a blue flannel shirt. He shaved off his month's dusty yellow beard and gave himself a crude haircut with his barber scissors.

His faded denim jacket and brush-scarred chaps were like those worn by the dead man. He'd even traded spurs and gotten the best of the swap. On the silver mounting of the dead man's spurs was engraved the name DUSTY.

Dusty Rhodes knew that he was taking on a tough and dangerous job. It was going to require all the guts and brains he had. Especially since he did not have any idea what the job was. No matter what it was, it was bound to be dirty and treacherous and almighty dangerous. They'd killed one Dusty Rhodes. Now they would have to kill a murdered man's ghost.

Meanwhile Dusty Rhodes had to hole up somewhere. He'd have to give the dead man's disappearance a chance to be forgotten. He'd have to give the Cooper Kid and Kansas and the two Blanchard Brothers time to do some cold-sweating. He'd let the mysterious disappearance of Dusty Rhodes rouse the Arizona cow country to a lot of wild rumors and speculations. And in a month, when the cow country was commencing to let the mystery fade away, the ghost of Dusty Rhodes would ride. And then Dusty Rhodes would really commence to play his dangerous game. Mebby in a month or so.

Meanwhile Dusty Rhodes had need of a safe hide-out. He was a rank stranger on a strange range, without an acquaintance or a friend. Even the ghost of a murdered man has to eat and get feed and water.

Dusty Rhodes rode back into the rough brushy hills. He found a place where there was feed and shade. He loosened the front cinch of the saddle and he squatted on his hunkers in the shade. He took the letters from his pocket.

The one with a Texas postmark was a brief note scrawled heavily in pencil.

> This ain't any friendly warning. I'm just telling you to stay out of Texas. Texas is too damn small to hold such an unhanged thing as you, Jake Rhodes. A cattle rustler and a horse thief and a hired killer. You ain't fit to be in the same big Texas with decent women. You ever show up again and you will be hanged.

That note bore no signature. But it was a man's handwriting.

The next two were written by two different females. The first was perfumed. It gave off the odor of gardenias.

> You Dusty. I hear too much about you and that gringo girl. You know who I mean. You better come to La Paz when you get this. Or maybe I tell something. You know what I mean. And when you come to the cantina you better have the truth to tell. Or how you like a knife in the gizzard? Lupe.

Dusty grinned faintly. He put the letter signed Lupe into its gardenia-perfumed envelope.

The other letter was on plain stationery. The wording was cold; there was no salutation.

> What you suggest or threaten brands you as a scoundrel and a blackmailer. Shooting would be too quick and easy a death for such a man as you are. However, I am in no position to dictate your death sentence. You must have common sense enough to realize that all I need do is pass the word to certain men and they will be glad to accommodate my wishes. I cannot force myself to voice your death sentence. Perhaps God or your Devil will decide your fate. Meanwhile I can do nothing but accept your brutal terms. I will set the date of the wedding. My school term expires June First. I will marry you on the Second of June. Linda Cooper.

The last letter was block printed in black ink on plain paper.

> Get proof before you have bench warrants sworn out. Then spring your trap. Proof and conviction of the men guilty. Before you collect a dollar of any reward money. I told you once. I'm telling you now for the last time. Don't hide behind that law badge to do murder or wipe out any personal grudge. You took an oath when you got that law badge. Live up to every word of that oath. I don't trust you. You are as guilty as the men you are after. Yours is a dirty job. Only a man of your breed would handle it. Any mistakes you make will be your own. One mistake and a lot of folks will be glad to go to your funeral.

The letter was unsigned. Dusty Rhodes put the letters back into his pocket. He'd cut himself a big hunk of rotten bear meat. It would take a lot of tough chewing, and a hell of a strong stomach. It wouldn't be easy to play out the hand of dead Cousin Jake.

Dusty Rhodes looked over the little tally book. It was one of those vest pocket, leather-covered books sent out with the compliments of the Livestock Commissioners.

Its pages were filled with brands and cattle tallies of branded cattle. One page was devoted to brands worked into other brands. There was a list of men's names: Clem Blanchard, Randy Blanchard, the Kansas, the Cooper Kid. Then there was a written and underlined Ramrod? The question mark after it was big and black.

From the pages of the tally book dropped a small folded paper. On it was written: *Hidden Cave*. And the little slip of folded paper gave off the faint odor of gardenias.

On the back of it was drawn a crude little map. It gave the location as midway between the Rail Seven headquarters ranch and the little border cowtown of La Paz. According to the map as Dusty Rhodes now read it, it was no more than a few miles from where the bushwhackers had shot down Jake (Dusty) Rhodes.

The map with the location of Hidden Cave furnished Dusty with plenty to think about. It must be well hidden; otherwise Cousin Jake wouldn't need to have had it mapped for him. It was mapped on gardenia-perfumed paper, and that gave it all the earmarks of a lovers' rendezvous. It might furnish Dusty with a hide-out. He headed for Hidden Cave, taking every precaution to keep out of sight.

Even then, he bushed up when he figured he had the exact location spotted. He waited until nightfall, eating dry jerky and washing it down with creek water. When nightfall hid his movements he left the roan hobbled there, and scouted on foot.

CHAPTER TWO

The Queen of Hearts

HOURS he sweat in futile, heel-blistering climbing over the rough boulder-strewn hills. The big lopsided moon shed its white light. The black shadows of brush and rock mocked him. If there was a Hidden Cave within a couple of miles, its opening was no bigger than the eye of a harness needle.

Weary, sweaty, discouraged, Dusty sat down on the slanted ground with his back against a boulder and his saddlegun across his lap. His feet throbbed inside the tight-fitting high-heeled boots that were never intended for mountain-climbing. He rolled and lit a cigaret. He cupped the match flame in his hands as he lit the brown paper cigaret. But then—

"You Dosty!"

He burnt his fingers rubbing out the match. His nostrils caught the perfume of gardenias. There was a swift movement in the thick manzanita brush nearby, then the sound of a choked sob. He was on his feet when the girl broke through the brush and flung herself at him. He had to grab onto her with both arms to keep them from losing their balance on the steep slant. It was not an unpleasant job. But it was a little bewildering.

The girl's arms clung around his neck, and her lips found his mouth, and she was kissing him and laughing. She had on a boy's cotton shirt and a pair of denim Levis. Her bare feet were shoved into huaraches. She was small-boned and slim as a boy; he could feel her tense young body shivering.

"What you call thees kind of a joke you play on Lupe?" Her clinging mouth came away from his. Her voice was a tense whisper. "Dead, hah?"

Dusty let out a sharp grunt of pain as her hands clawed at his face. She was sobbing in a she-wildcat fury, spitting Mexican words at him. They were Mexican swear words, he reckoned. He held her arms and pushed her away from him.

"Gosh sakes," Dusty was grinning wryly, "take it easy!"

"You Dosty! You gringo pig-dog! *Cabron!* Gringo *cabron!* They say to me, Lupe, that Dosty Rhodes he is dead. You never see that lousy gringo son of a snake no more. You don't theenk your Dosty gringo ees dead, then ride to where you tell us he went to meet that Linda Cooper when the moon she comes op. Ride there, you Lupe. And you weel find the dead carcass of your Dosty Rhodes!

"So today I ride there. Ees nothing.

No dead Dosty. Somebody ees lie. So you lie to me once more, hah? You theenk ees damn' fonny to play a joke. All them hours I pray on my knees to The Lady of Guadalupe for who I am name' to forgive this Guadalupe Lopez because I tell them gringos where to find you makin' the love to that girl Linda Cooper. I burn candles there at the shrine. I pray. I weep tears.

"Then when ees dark I come here to thees cave of ours to die. I have the knife ready. I am going to push the knife deep eento my heart. Then I hear somebody come! I wait. You light the match. *Pfui!* You scare the gizzard out of thees Lupe. Ees that Dosty's ghost! Bot the ghost he don't smoke tobacco. Ees a lie, then. Ees one more lie to tell, you damn' Dosty."

She wrenched an arm free. He saw the long thin sharp-pointed knife flash. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it until she dropped the weapon. The brief scuffle had taken them out of the shadow and into the moonlight. Dusty got a look at the little she-wildcat.

Heavy blueblack hair tumbled to her slim waist. Her skin was the color of ivory. From under black brows her eyes, thick-lashed, were enormous pools of depthless black. Lips as deep red as poppy petals were pulled back from sharp white teeth. In the moonlight she looked as young as a schoolgirl, younger than her eighteen years.

Her eyes were staring at his face. The wildcat fight went out of her. Dusty saw stark terror mirrored there in her eyes.

"You—you are not Dosty! Who?"

"I'm Dusty Rhodes."

"*No.*" Her voice was a scared whisper.

"How do you know?"

"Ees no knife scar where I slash you that night. When you lie to me and I want to cut out that tongue. Ees no knife scar along the cheek. Who are you? A ghost sent by El Diablo to ponish thees Lupe for her bad sins?"

Dusty remembered seeing the thin bone-white line along the lean jaw of the dead man.

He reached out and took her hand. It felt icy cold in his. "The Dusty Rhodes you knew was bushwhacked. Killed. I come to take his place."

"*El Diablo*! The Devil sent you, then?" Her voice whispered.

"Perhaps. But not the way you got me figured out. You loved that Dusty Rhodes?"

"Sometimes. Then, sometimes I hate heem. That Dosty was an evil hombre. A liar. Hees love was lies. Ees that gringo girl he wants. That what-you-call school-marm. That Linda Cooper. So that Dosty he throws thees Lupe away like I am an old sack. He laugh at me. So I tell them gringos where to find that Dosty last night. Because I know where he goes.

"He tells that gringo schoolmarm to meet heem at my cave that I show heem. The Hidden Cave I find when I am a little muchacha. The cave I make my little shrine to The Lady of Guadalupe. Where I make my prayers. Where I dream my foolish dreams. Where I take that Dosty when hees lies they make me believe my prayers are answer' and my dreams come true.

"That Dosty would take *her* there, that gringo girl with the hair yellow like gold to make love to her. Ees mine, that Hidden Cave! That Dosty spits on my prayers, on my foolish dreams. To take that gringo girl there, ees an evil theeng."

"An evil thing," said Dusty Rhodes. "He was no good. Not worth your tears or your prayers. He wasn't worth the love you wasted on him."

"I gave that Dosty no love. A few kisses. The rest I gave was only promises. Like I learn from them girls at the cantina. Promises I make weeth the eyes, the leetle songs. *Madre de Dios,* who are you, then? No ghost?"

"No. I'm not a ghost. Dusty was my cousin. We looked alike—like twins. You savvy?"

Her little laugh was brittle. The fear went out of her eyes. She nodded her head.

"You make revenge on them gringos that keel your cousin Dosty, no?"

Revenge Lupe could understand.

"I buried Dusty Rhodes, hid his grave. I have his horse and his saddle. I've got the law badge he wore pinned to his undershirt. I'm takin' his place. For revenge. For somethin' else I don't quite savvy myself. They murdered him. Never gave him a fightin' chance. Dusty Rhodes was no good, but he didn't deserve to be murdered."

"No. Ees my fault, that murder. Ees a black sin."

"I need a place to hide out for a few weeks. I need somebody like you to fetch

me grub and bring me news. That would help mark the black sin off your book."

Suddenly Dusty felt ashamed. It was like playing a trick on a child.

"No. Forget it, Lupe. Take your sins to the priest. Never mind me. I'll make out all right. All I ask of you is to keep our meeting a secret. Say nothin' to nobody. Go home."

"No. I too want a revenge. Was my fault that Dosty got kill'."

She stood close to him. Her dark eyes were searching his. Then she smiled softly.

"You are not an evil hombre. You are a good man. I like you." Her eyes were shining.

"And that's the promise you used on Dusty when he tried to paw you?" Dusty grinned faintly.

"No. You, I would not tease." She spoke quietly.

"And you," he grinned down at her, "I would not put in danger. You did no wrong. Sooner or later they would have killed Dusty Rhodes. Talk it over with your priest and he will tell you that. Forget Dusty. And go home now, Lupe."

"I have no home. No mamma. No papa. There ees only the cantina to go back to. Where I dance and sing. For them *borrachins*—the drunken hombres—. Me, I love no man, but I weel hide you. I will take care of you. We weel make revenge together. Not love.

"Ees planty grob een the Hidden Cave. I cook for you there. I go back to the cantina at La Paz. When them gringo *borrachins* make their drunk talk, I listen. Like that Dosty had me listen. I remember what they say. Then I return here to the Hidden Cave and I tell you all they say."

It sounded good, as if it were made to order for his plans. Though his plans were indefinite and groping. With this fiery little Mexican señorita to work with him, he stood a gambling chance of finding out what Cousin Jake (Dusty) Rhodes was after when he played range detective. Something to do with brand-altering and cattle-rustling. But something bigger than a few head of stolen cattle. Dusty sensed that it was a big crooked deal of some sort that had cost the other Dusty Rhodes his life.

"It's too dangerous, Lupe." His voice was harsh. "Them bushwhackers won't stop at murderin' even a beautiful girl—"

"You theenk I am beautiful?" Her dark eyes teased him with hidden laughter.

"That ain't the point," said Dusty gruffly. "I'm talkin' about murder. And the big ugly murderer they call Kansas. He wouldn't stop at plain quick murder."

"I am eighteen. Since I am ten years old I have look out for myself. Let that beeg steenk Kansas come so close to me I rip hees belly open."

Dusty grinned. He reached down and picked up the knife he'd taken away from her. He handed it back to her.

She took it. "Pouf! Had I really wanted to knife you, *compadre*—"

"You're tryin' to make me believe you let me take your knife away?"

"Try again, amigo."

Dusty grinned and grabbed her wrist. Quick as he moved, his hand grabbed air. He got no more than a brief glimpse of the flashing steel blade. A sharp stinging pain shot along his jaw. His hand came away wet-red with blood.

LUPE STOOD beyond reach, a smile frozen on her red lips. Her eyes were dark.

She was breathing fast, and her voice was a whisper. "When it heals you weel have the scar there. Just like that scar I make on the cheek of that other Dosty. I prove to you that Lupe Lopez can take care of herself. And without that scar them gringos all know, never could you pass for that Dosty Rhodes. Now we go eento the Hidden Cave. I bandage the knife slash. Perhaps when you are no longer so angry you weel forgive thees Lupe, no?"

Dusty chuckled.

"You've got a brain as sharp as that knife, Lupe. Now where's that Hidden Cave?" He held a handkerchief against his jaw.

"Ees here. Behind the rock."

They crawled in on all fours. The tunnel went in through thick manzanita brush that hid a small opening. Once inside the cavern widened like a huge black mouth. Lupe had a candle lit before he could get on his feet.

The air was cool and damp. From somewhere sounded the trickle of water. The air was clean and fresh. He knew there must be another opening somewhere to give a draught. When he looked around he gave

a long low whistle of real astonishment.

There were blue and white Mexican rugs on the clean-swept earthen floor. Rawhide kyack boxes filled with grub were stacked neatly against one wall. Boxes of ammunition for saddle carbines were in a rack; for the six-shooters there was ammo on another gun rack.

There were smaller caverns branching off. One held a sheet-iron stove and an open grill. Wood and charcoal were stacked for fuel. Shelves held cans of sugar and salt and chili pepper. A string of red chilis hung down near a cupboard.

"My kitchen," smiled Lupe. She led him on, a lighted candle in her hand.

They moved into a small cavern where there was a carved and painted Lady of Guadalupe in a niche. A candle burned in its ruby red glass cup. There was a prayer-book and a rosary.

Dusty stood hat in hand while she knelt for a minute and offered a prayer. She crossed herself and led him back into the big main cavern. She bathed and dressed and bandaged the knife slash along his lean jaw. She gave him tequila to drink.

Then she halved green Mexican limes to suck with the potent tequila. He sat back and took it easy while she cooked him the best meal he had ever eaten. Mexican grub it was—chili con carne, frijoles, tortillas, tamale pie. He washed it down with sour red wine.

While she cooked, Lupe sang softly in a small, clear, birdlike voice that pinched his heart with its plaintive refrain even though he did not understand any of the words.

"Ees a little love song I make for you, Chico. I call you Chico. One Dosty ees too planty." She promised to teach him the words in Mexican.

"That Dosty he spoke planty good Mexican. You mus' learn. You mus' not get trip' op because you cannot talk the language of the Mexican border, no?"

"You think of everything, Lupe."

"I make some son of a gon a good wife, no?"

The tequila put fire in his blood. The chili-spiced Mexican grub filled his belly. The tobacco smoke tasted good. Lupe's little songs smoothed the tight kinks out of his too-taut nerves. She was something to haunt a man's lonely dreams—small and beautiful and wild and alive.

She matched the wildness in the blood of Dusty Rhodes, cowpuncher, the wildness that had prompted him to take the identity of his murdered cousin Jake and play out a dead man's hand. The wild call of high adventure was in him. He was in his middle twenties, even though he was older than that in many ways. Always and forever he kept alive the wildness and recklessness in his heart. Many of the cowpuncher breed were like that: old hands at sixteen, but still wild and prodigal when their hair was white. The dangerous calling of a cowhand's life needed that spirit. Cowpunchers were a breed unto themselves.

Dusty Rhodes fell in love that night. He fell in love with this little Mexican girl who had fire and courage and wild beauty. Perhaps it was the tequila. Perhaps it was the fulfillment of a thousand and one lonesome campfire dreams.

She sat close to him on the Mexican rug, and his arm went around her, and the perfume of her coarse black hair was heavy in his nostrils, headier than the tequila. The softness of her dark eyes, the warmth of her lips when she lifted her face and kissed him, sent his blood pounding into his throat, but even then he did not make love to her.

Perhaps it was the candle burning in its red glass yonder, flickering the shadows like prayer-shadows on The Lady of Guadalupe, that made him hold her no more ardently than he would have held a child. Perhaps it was just the way he was.

"You are a good man, my Chico," she whispered against his lips. "For you I shall say many prayers."

Before daybreak she left him to take the Rail Seven roan to some hidden pasture below the Mexican border.

"I come back when ees safe to come. Keep a candle burning for The Lady of Guadalupe. Eat good and sleep lots. Do not get too fat. I do not like my Chico to get a round fat belly. *Adiosita.* Ees mean goodbye for no longer than a little time."

Her arms went around his neck. Her lips pressed warm against his. Her slim body trembled a little as he held her close. Then she was gone, leaving behind her the lingering scent of gardenias, leaving behind her the disturbing memory of her. Guadalupe Lopez—called Lupe.

"I leave weeth you," she had whispered against his lips, "a little bit of my heart.

Adiosita!" No more than a child in years, but with the ancient wisdom of all women in her.

She was too easy to remember in a man's dreams, too poignant to forget if a man tried to. . . .

It was only after she had left that Dusty remembered with a twisted grin that he had asked her no questions at all. No questions concerning the murdered Dusty Rhodes; the tough Blanchard Brothers, Clem and Randy; Kansas and the Cooper Kid; the unknown Ramrod; Linda Cooper who had hair like gold and who taught school at the tough little border cowtown of La Paz; Linda Cooper who owned the Rail Seven outfit. He hadn't asked why it was Dusty Jake Rhodes forked Rail Seven gelding. All these other questions now piled in on him as he lay down and dropped off into a heavy sleep of exhaustion.

Those questions went unanswered. The dreams of Dusty Rhodes were nightmarish, moistening him with cold sweat. He slept with his six-shooter in his hand.

CHAPTER THREE

The Red Jack

DUSTY RHODES came awake with a start, the gun gripped in his hand. Before he could get the sleep out of his eyes the gun had been kicked out of his hand. He scrambled to his feet, crouched, fists doubled, still half drugged by sleep.

"Come on, Dusty." The man's voice was a soft drawl. "I'd like nothin' better than to kill you with my two bare hands."

He was a tall lean man somewhere in his early twenties, lean as rawhide. He had a homely freckled face and a jutting jaw and nose. His fiery red hair was sweat-matted, uncombed, cowlicked. He took off his sweat-stained hat and tossed it with his saddlegun and six-shooter on the sandstone floor. His eyes were slivers of green glass.

"Who the hell are you?" Dusty, still partly drugged by heavy sleep, blurted it out. Then he realized what a mistake he'd made. It was too late now to do anything about it.

They were about the same height and build, staring at each other now, eye to eye. That pair of green eyes were knifing into him. The expression on the rugged homely face was slowly changing. From fighting hatred it faded to a puzzled bewilderment. He shook his red head. But the big fists stayed clenched and the knuckles showed bone white.

"You look like him. You're a dead ringer for him. But by the hell you ain't Jake Rhodes. Them ain't the eyes of the Jake Rhodes. I run him outa Texas and I oughta know. They're not as pale colored. They meet without flinchin'. And Jake Rhodes could wake up in hell and never ask 'Who the hell are you?' He'd know Brick O'Neil even in Hell if that's where I got to foller him to git him. I'm Brick O'Neil from Sacaton, Texas. Now who the hell are you, mister?"

"You're the man wrote Jake that warnin' note?"

"I wrote him to stay outa Texas. Who're you?"

"Dusty Rhodes. Cousin of Jake's. You got here a little late. They bushwhacked Jake Rhodes a couple nights ago."

"Who done the job?"

"Some fellers didn't like the way Jake parted his hair. Or wore his hat. Or tried to ketch 'em rustlin' cattle."

"Jake Rhodes ketchin' cattle rustlers? If he wanted to tag a cattle rustler all he had to do was grab his own bushy tail."

"Takes a thief, as the sayin' goes, to ketch a thief. Jake had a law badge pinned to his undershirt. Where do you wear yourn, Texan?"

"It shows that plain?" grinned the big redhaired man from Sacaton, Texas.

"Plain as a brand that ain't commenced to peel."

"I bin a Texas Ranger since I was old enough to join. But I ain't workin' at it now. I taken a vacation. I'm a plain citizen. Anything I do wrong can't be blamed on the Texas Rangers. I aimed to do some harm when I taken Jake Rhodes' trail, though. How much cousinly love you holdin' fer Jake Rhodes?" The green eyes glinted hard.

Dusty shook his head. "I hated Jake's guts. They murdered him in cold blood; damned if I know just why I'm playin' his hand out. Between me'n you, Ranger, there should be no hard feelin's."

The big freckled red-tufted fists unclenched. The glitter dimmed. A lopsided grin spread across the homely face.

"I reckon you're right, Dusty Rhodes."

He held out his hand and Dusty gripped it. Their eyes met and held and each pair liked what it found.

"You traveled a long ways to track down a cattle rustler, Ranger."

"Wasn't cattle rustlin' or horse stealin' or killin' a few men," said the redheaded Texas Ranger, "that set me on Jake Rhodes's trail. I had a kid sister. Jake Rhodes had a way with wimmin. Young things that didn't know a real man from a damned spur jinglin' scoundrel.

"He talked her into runnin' off with him. They was goin' to git married. I taken in after 'em. When the trail got hot Jake Rhodes quit her. Left her behind. He could travel faster alone.

"When I found her at the town where he'd dropped her, she begged me not to foller Jake Rhodes. I let her talk me outa the notion. I taken her home. Ever hear of a girl dyin' of love sickness, mister? It's a slow death. But it kills in the end. It finally killed that kid sister of mine.

"When I buried her, I taken Jake Rhodes's trail. Got a letter she wrote to him in a sealed envelope. It's still sealed. It's in my pocket. I aimed to have Jake Rhodes break the seal and read that letter out loud to me. Then I was gonna kill him."

Brick O'Neil took a soiled envelope from his pocket. He held it clenched in his red-tufted fist.

He pulled a match head across his chaps. "I might as well set fire to it, now."

"Better read it first," said Dusty.

"Why?"

"Damned if I know. Call it a hunch. I can't believe Cousin Jake had what it takes to break a woman's heart."

There was a curious look on the Texan's face. He smoothed out the crushed envelope and slit it open with a jackknife blade.

By the flickering light of a candle he read the single page letter. The color drained from his weathered face so that the freckles stood out like black warts.

"She had it stamped and ready to mail. In case I taken a notion to go after Jake Rhodes. But she never mailed it. I found it amongst her things. Addressed to Jake Rhodes, La Paz, Arizona. Shows how little a man kin ever know, mister, about wimmin, even a man's own kid sister. You know a man named Randy Blanchard?"

"I know who he is."

"Randy Blanchard is the damned blackleg scoundrel that broke the heart of my kid sister. He came to Sacaton while I was away off in another part of Texas for more'n a year. He'd gone when I come back to Sacaton. And they told me my kid sister had run off with Jake Rhodes.

"Jake had a greasy-sack outfit near my place. Till she died, Sis never told me that Jake Rhodes had bin hired an' paid to take her to Arizona where this Randy Blanchard was located. Randy Blanchard killed a Texas Ranger in a drunken gun fight—account of my sis. He'd quit Texas in a hurry. Hell, I knowed that. But I didn't know till now that it was Randy Blanchard, not Jake Rhodes, she was in love with. And he run off like a coyote."

"But if he'd hired Jake Rhodes and paid Jake cash to fetch your sister to Arizona where he was, he musta thought a lot of her."

"Wasn't Randy Blanchard hired Jake Rhodes. It was my Sis. She hired that damned renegade to take her to the man that had disgraced her. Mebbyso she aimed to ask him to marry her. Most mebbyso she aimed to kill Randy Blanchard."

"Tough." That was all Dusty could find to say.

"She didn't want the wrong man killed. The letter was to warn Jake Rhodes I was after him. It was to give Jake a headstart for a gitaway. Seems like this kid sis of mine didn't want Randy Blanchard's dirty blood on my hands. Or Jake Rhode's blood, either. When she got too down-sick to take to the trail, she musta left Randy Blanchard's punishment up to Godamighty. Sis done a lot of prayin' them months in bed before she died."

Brick O'Neil stood there in the candlelight and folded the letter. He put it back in its envelope, and then slipped them into his chaps pocket.

"You know this Randy Blanchard?"

"He's one of Jake Rhodes' bushwhackers. One of them I'm after, when the sign is right. I kin point him out to you then. But right now I'm holed up here. Layin' low till it's time to go after 'em. Which reminds me. How'd you locate this hole in the wall?"

"I sighted a kid slippin' outa the brush here. I'd picked up the news at La Paz that

Jake Rhodes was dead. The talk told where his carcass could be found. It wasn't where they said. I was suspicious. I was prowlin' around when I sighted this kid slip outa the brush an' fork a horse hid in the brush. The kid picked up a roan Rail Seven geldin' I'd found hobbled. And she pulled out. I prowled around till I finally located the way into this cave. The kid didn't cover his tracks too good."

"The kid is my pardner. Her name is Lupe Lopez. This is her Hidden Cave. There's tequila. Plenty of grub, too, she left cooked. How'd you like that damned grin smashed off your face, Ranger?"

Brick O'Neil's grin faded. "I'm beggin' the lady's pardon. And yours. No, I ain't grinnin'. You kin smash away, mister; I'll not lift a hand. I mean what I say."

The anger went out of Dusty's grayblue eyes. He got the tequila and salt and limes and two clean glasses.

"I'm kinda touchy, Brick. She's just a little Mexican cantina girl. But she's aces in my deck. I'd whip the best friend I got on earth if he hinted anything—"

"I'd be there to side you. I got a notion I might be that best friend. I ain't lettin' you play this game lonehanded. Like I said, I'm on vacation. I got this Randy Blanchard to run down. How many more is there in the outfit?"

"Clem Blanchard. He's Randy's brother. Both tough as a boot. A big stinkin' thing they call Kansas. A bald-faced, buck-toothed button called the Cooper Kid. And there's some unknown gent who is the big Ramrod behind whatever is goin' on that Jake was smellin' out with a law-badge pinned to his undershirt. He musta had 'em about ready fer the bounty kill when they bushwhacked him. They're tough."

"So are we. You mind if I buy me a few white chips in your game?"

"Proud to deal you in."

"Proud to be in."

They lifted their glasses, and licked the pinch of salt.

"*Salud*, Dusty."

"Here's how, Brick."

They downed the raw tequila and sucked the half green limes.

"Speakin' of the little Mexican lady," grinned Brick O'Neil, "don't let her bein' a Mexican stop what you got in mind. My mother was a Mexican. I'm proud as hell of her. And I'm proud of my daddy, Captain Tim O'Neil of the Texas Rangers. Aw, hell! I'm just runnin' off at the head, pardner."

"It ain't got around to marryin' talk, Brick. I just met Lupe last night. But thanks."

Dusty didn't bother to wonder why he'd taken on a pardner he didn't even know. He'd been almighty careful about giving his friendship to any man. He'd never thrown in with any man before. But there was something about this big homely freckled redheaded Ranger that tore down all barriers. Later when they talked about it Brick O'Neil said that he felt the same way.

Brick turned loose the horse he'd picked up at La Paz, and packed his saddle up to the cave. They were afoot there now at the Hidden Cave.

"Plumb at the mercy of a little Mexican lady named Lupe Lopez," chuckled the redheaded Ranger. "I'll never live this down if the yarn gits back to Texas. Especially if that Lupe of yours was to sell us down the river."

Dusty grinned. They were pardners now. They could josh back and forth about things that would be fight-talk between any two other men.

Dusty took the four letters from his pocket. The note from Brick O'Neil he handed to the Ranger. He touched a match to Lupe's note and the one Brick held.

Dusty showed the Ranger the note from Linda Cooper, and the block-printed note the unsigned man had sent. The Ranger figured the unsigned note had been sent by the sheriff who had sworn Dusty Jake Rhodes in as a special undercover deputy.

Together the two pardners studied everything in the little tally book. To them it made sense. The Rail Seven was a big outfit. Brick O'Neil said it was owned by some rich Kansas City dudes who had a big interest in the Livestock Commission. Their names along with the name of the company that owned the Rail Seven outfit were on the cover of the complimentary tally book. Emmons, Safford, Burkart and Long. They owned the Rail Seven. According to this tally book stamped with their company name, the Blanchards, Kansas, and the Cooper Kid were all rustling Rail Seven cattle.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Four-Flush

WHEN a week went by and Lupe did not come back to the Hidden Cave, Dusty Rhodes was fit to be tied.

"If she don't show up tonight, I'm goin' to La Paz after her!"

"Afoot? Twenty-five miles?"

They were playing mumblepeg. Dusty held his jackknife by its blade. He flipped it deftly and the blade stuck in the ground. His eyes glinted like steel.

"On my belly," said Dusty flatly. "Crawlin'. Twenty-five. I don't give a damn if it's a thousand miles! If she don't show up tonight, that means she's dead. That, or they're holdin' her back. And by hell, Ranger—"

"You got it bad, son." There was a grin on Brick O'Neil's homely freckled face. His green eyes looked past Dusty towards the cave's entrance.

"All right. I got it bad."

"Is she tall and slender, Dusty? With mebbyso ten or a dozen freckles scattered acrost her nose? Eyes that are gray with little brown flecks? And hair the color of red-gold braided and coiled like a gold snake on a prideful head?"

Dusty had his back to the entrance of the cave. They were squatted there on the floor facing one another, drinking tequila, playing their endless game. Dusty flipped his jackknife again and the blade stuck.

"I told you she had black hair, black eyes—"

"With a little double-barreled derringer pistol?" drawled the red-headed Ranger, the slow grin spreading, leaving his green eyes cold.

"No. She packs a knife."

"Then the lady standin' yonder must be somebody else. Don't move sudden, pardner, don't bat an eye. She looks scared enough to shoot, and them little derringer toys kin damage a man at close quarters this-a-way."

Dusty froze where he was squatted. He watched the redheaded Ranger lift both hands slowly, uncross his legs, and get to his feet. He bowed stiffly, pulling off his hat with a stilted slowness.

"Be kind-hearted, ma'am," the lazy drawl came from his homely grin. "Be almighty thoughtful before you shoot. Them little derringers kick like Missouri mules. And the explosion inside this cave would bust your purty eardrums. Better think this over careful, lady."

"This is the second of June." Linda Cooper's voice had a brittle sound. "Get up on your feet, Mister Dusty Rhodes."

Dusty got to his feet slowly and faced her. She had crawled in without a sound. Now she stood there, a tall girl in a shabby old riding habit. The little double barreled .41 caliber derringer was pointed at Dusty's belly. Her eyes were hard and bright and dangerous. Linda Cooper had come there to kill the man she'd known as Dusty Rhodes. Nothing was going to stop her.

Dusty cut a look at Brick O'Neil.

"Midnight." The Ranger said.

Dusty got it. They had no watch. When they got ready for bed, one of them would say "Midnight" and blow out the candle. The candle in its tequila bottleneck was within reach of the Ranger's boot.

Dusty was ready. Brick kicked out the candle. Both men threw themselves flat. The double explosion of the twin-barreled .41 derringer was cannon-loud. Through its roar knifed the girl's thin scream of terror. Dusty heard the sounds of a brief scuffle. Then there was a hysterical sob. And finally the Ranger's slow drawl.

"Strike a light, pardner. What do you do when a lady passes out in one of them faintin' spells?"

Dusty lighted the candle. Linda Cooper was moaning a little, blinking her eyes.

There was a sudden noisy commotion outside and the Cooper Kid, his face scratched and bleeding, crawled in through the narrow opening. Right behind him came Lupe. She prodded the Cooper Kid up onto his feet with the point of her long thin-bladed knife.

"Carramba!" Lupe was breathing fast. Her eyes were black with fury. "They ambush me, Chico! They follow me. She has the gon. They tie the hands. Tie the rag in my mouth. She knows my Hidden Cave. I get the hands loose. I stick a knife een this Keed's gizzard. When I hear the gun shoot, almost I keel thees Keed. You are all right, Chico?"

Lupe shoved the Cooper Kid aside. Her arms went around Dusty's neck and she kissed him. His arms held her and he

kissed her back hard and the strip of bandage came loose so the scar her knife had made showed lividly.

Brick O'Neil lifted Linda Cooper to her feet. Lupe saw the tall redheaded Ranger for the first time. She gripped her knife and her eyes glittered. Rusty felt her tense. He held her with one arm around her shoulders.

"Easy, Lupe. That's my pardner, Brick O'Neil."

The Cooper Kid was staring at Dusty. Cold sweat beaded his face. Inside a cold fear gripped his heart.

"Damn you, Dusty Rhodes! We killed you. By the hell, I helped kill you!" His voice was a brittle whisper.

"Yeah. From the brush. Give the Cooper Kid a shot of that tequila, Brick. He looks sick."

Linda Cooper stood staring at Dusty.

"This is the second of June," she said. "They said you were dead. My brother Harry told me he'd helped kill you. But they never found your body. That man called Kansas was drunk and acting queer at La Paz, like he was badly scared. Clem and Randy Blanchard stayed sober and watched Lupe. And Lupe was singing and dancing at the cantina, and all the time she kept waiting for a chance to slip out of town, like a trapped animal.

"A lot of strange ugly stories, and no two stories alike. You agreed to the second of June for a wedding day. I'm here to keep my end of the bargain—with a gun. I'll kill myself when I've killed Dusty Rhodes."

"Dusty Jake Rhodes is dead," Dusty spoke quietly. "Your brother helped kill him. It was bushwhacker murder. My name is Dusty Rhodes. Jake Rhodes was my cousin. I hated his guts. But I'm playing his string out. Any marryin' I do will be between Lupe Lopez and me."

"What about my brother Harry?"

"He'll git his chance to prove himself, one way or the other. For your sake, lady, I hope the Kid has the guts to be a man. All he's got to do for a while is keep his mouth shut. And stay out from underfoot when the showdown comes. Your kid brother Harry ain't got what it takes to be another Billy the Kid." Dusty turned to the Cooper Kid.

"How about it?" Dusty's voice sounded fatherly. "Don't you think you just about got a bellyfull of this renegade cattle-rustlin', bushwackin' stuff, Kid?"

"They'll kill me if I make a break for it. Kansas will shoot me down if I coyote. They got him watchin' me day an' night. He was dead drunk and I got away from him. But they'll kill me if I squeal on 'em or try to quit the country.

"Hell, I'm yellow. I know that. I got to get drunk before I got the guts to tackle anything. They made me do it. It's too late now to get out. You'd better kill me now, or I'll kill myself and get it over with. Only for Linda, I'd have killed myself before now. She needed me. I'm all she's got."

"You bin a big help to your sister, Kid," Dusty said flatly.

"Let him alone." Linda put her arm around her younger brother, mothering him, protecting him.

"Who got you into the mess, Kid?" Dusty asked bluntly.

"I DID." Linda's eyes were dark. "Harry is no coward. He wouldn't run when he had the chance. He did the only thing he could do to save me. He threw in with Clem and Randy Blanchard. It was those two who paired him off with that Kansas killer."

"And I messed it up," said the Cooper Kid bitterly.

"That was my fault." Linda went on. "I didn't take you into my full confidence." She was looking straight at Dusty Rhodes now.

"I was desperate. When Dusty Jake Rhodes showed me the law badge he kept hidden, and told me he was working as a range detective gathering enough evidence to send Clem and Randy Blanchard to the pen for cattle rustling, he made it sound like a reprieve from death for me and for my brother Harry. He said he wanted to be paid for his range detective work. I told him I'd give him all I had. I meant the ranch my father left me and Harry when he died, the Bench Triangle. It joins the Rail Seven outfit. I wanted the Blanchards put away before they ruined Harry."

"The Rail Seven kin be worked into the Bench Triangle," said Dusty.

"Yes. I thought that's what Dusty Rhodes wanted. Then he told me he wanted me along with the Bench Triangle. If I didn't marry him, he said he'd send Harry

Cooper to prison, along with Kansas and the two Blanchards. Harry found that out too. So Harry helped Kansas and the two Blanchards bushwhack Dusty Jake Rhodes."

"But Clem and Randy Blanchard," said the Cooper Kid, "shot to miss. Kansas and I did the killin'."

"You and Kansas may have used the guns that killed Dusty Jake Rhodes," said Dusty. "But the two Blanchards are guilty accordin' to law. That right, Brick?"

"That's right," said the tall redheaded man.

"Brick O'Neil's a Texas Ranger," said Dusty. "He savvies the laws. We're pardners. We're pickin' it up where Dusty Jake Rhodes left off. Without any kind of rewards either, lady." Dusty grinned and the grin on the Ranger's homely face gave its answer.

"And that's what we're dealin' your kid brother in on, ma'am. If either of you has any real evidence that we kin use for proof, we'll git bench warrants sworn out for Clem and Randy Blanchard and Kansas. And we'll move in on them fast. I'm usin' Dusty Jake Rhodes' law badge to give us authority. We'll back it up with our guns. How about it, Kid?"

"I'll give you all the proof you need," said the Cooper Kid. "I helped do the cattle stealin'. I helped kill Dusty Rhodes on orders from the Blanchards. I'll tell everything I know on the witness stand."

"Along with what Dusty seen and heard the night you bushwhacked Dusty Jake Rhodes," said the Texas Ranger, "that'll send the two Blanchards and Kansas to the pen. If they're still alive, of course. But by then, Randy Blanchard will be dead."

"Kill Randy," said the Cooper Kid, "and you'll have to kill Clem. The two Blanchards stick together."

"Then I'll kill Clem," said Dusty. "Like as not Kansas will git shot up in the process."

Dusty felt Lupe's slim fingers tighten on his arm. She was watching Linda Cooper.

Linda Cooper's face was pale, her eyes dark and troubled. Then her husky voice broke the silence.

"Kill the two Blanchards and Kansas," she said measuring each word, "and you've killed no more than the hired men. Clem and Randy Blanchard are ramrod for the Rail Seven. Clem runs the upper outfit, Randy runs the lower outfit. Together they've stolen a lot of Rail Seven cattle, using all the tricks of the cattle rustler trade. You're cowmen; you know the tricks. In the past few years they've run the Rail Seven outfit into the red. It's lost money every year for its Kansas City owners.

"Until now they're ready and willing to unload the Rail Seven at a lower than rock-bottom price. It's the man with the cash to lay on the barrelhead that is the Big Ramrod who gives the Blanchards their orders. He's the man who deserves worse than prison. Hanging is too good for him. Dusty Jake Rhodes found out who the Big Ramrod was. That's why Jake Rhodes had to be killed. He's not the first man who's been murdered on orders from the Big Ramrod."

"Who is this Big Ramrod?"

"He's a high stake gambler. He owns the cantina where Lupe works. He owns La Paz. He hopes to own the Rail Seven and all the border range. His name is Jack Duke. Sheriff Jack Duke."

Dusty took the note printed in neat block letters from his pocket. He handed it to Linda Cooper. She read it quickly.

"Sheriff Jack Duke wrote this."

"Sheriff Jack Duke swore in Dusty Jake Rhodes as an undercover deputy to git proof against his own hired cattle rustlers. Why?"

"Because he had no further need for Clem and Randy Blanchard. They had to be gotten rid of. Jack Duke had his tongue in his cheek when he printed that note. He sat back to let his undercover deputy gather enough proof to get bench warrants for Clem and Randy Blanchard. A bench warrant reads: 'Dead or Alive.' The Blanchards would be taken dead. Kansas would get killed. Sheriff Jack Duke would stand in the clear, a peace officer with an unblemished record."

"And the Cooper Kid?" asked Dusty bluntly.

"Wouldn't be harmed," said Linda Cooper. "I had the word of Sheriff Jack Duke. I had the power to hold him to his word. Sheriff Jack Duke had the money to buy the Rail Seven when it could be bought at his own price. But he couldn't use his own name. It might connect him and his sheriff's badge with the cattle rustling.

"So I made the deal for him. I used Jack Duke's money. And I closed the deal. The Rail Seven outfit is in my name. The signed papers came the day before Dusty Jake Rhodes was bushwhacked. Until right now nobody but Jack Duke and me know anything about the deal."

"How does Sheriff Jack Duke figure on gettin' the Rail Seven outfit?"

"Jack Duke married me and the Rail Seven. Today. Half an hour before I left La Paz. Harry swore he'd helped kill Dusty Jake Rhodes. Sheriff Jack Duke threatened to hang Harry unless I married him. I came here because—" she broke off.

"—because I tell her," said Lupe, "that Dusty Rhodes is not dead. I tell her to follow me. I prove it. I hate her then. But no more. It is the one way I can get out of La Paz. Always, day and night, I am watch'. I can't come back. I eat my heart out.

"That Jack Duke watch me with his yellow eyes. He smile. He know I have a worry in my heart. That I want to slip away from La Paz. He has somebody to watch me. But that is not all.

"That Clem Blanchard he wants me. That Randy Blanchard he wants me. Jack Duke tell them to cut the high card to see who gets little Lupe. Is Clem Blanchard who cuts the high card. Is from Clem Blanchard I got to run away. Quick.

"So I tell that to Linda Cooper. She is the new bride. Sheriff Jack Duke cannot refuse to let the bride go for a ride on horseback. To take along Lupe. He send the Cooper Kid along. So we come here. And the fats is in the fires. I spoil your game, Chico, no?" She looked up at him with a worried frown.

"Nope." The redheaded Texas Ranger was crouched and peering out through the manzanita brush that screened the cave's opening.

"Looks like you've decoyed 'em right up under our guns. You said you'd point out Randy Blanchard when the sign was right, Dusty. Take a look at them four horsebackers down yonder that's ridin' along the wagon trail. Which 'un is Randy Blanchard?"

Dusty peered out through the brush at the four men on horseback.

Kansas was riding in the lead. Behind him Clem and Randy Blanchard rode side by side. Following them was a tall stranger wearing a black hat. His saddle and chaps were black. He wore a black leather jacket.

"It's the two Blanchards and Kansas and some gent dressed in black ridin' a black horse. Like he's advertisin' for an undertaker job."

"Sheriff Jack Duke."

It was Linda Cooper who spoke. Her eyes shadowed dark in a face drained of its color.

Texas Ranger Brick O'Neil stood close to her. His homely face was roughly chiseled from granite. His eyes were green as winter ice.

"You're married to this Sheriff Jack Duke." His voice was a slow drawl. "Mebbyso you'll be widowed on your weddin' day."

"An unkissed bride," Linda said quietly.

"You won't shed tears at Jack Duke's grave?"

"Not so much as a single drop."

"You won't hold it against the man that kills Jack Duke?"

"I'll be grateful for life to that man."

"I just wanted it straight," said the

homely Texas Ranger, "before we opened up the ruckus. I'm just about the damndest homeliest thing on earth. And you're the most beautiful woman that ever lived. And this ain't the time nor the proper place to be talkin' about somethin' that needs moonlight and soft music.

"But if I figgered I stood a gamblin' chance to come a-courtin' the Widder Jack Duke, I'd go into this comin' ruckus with a bullet-proof hide."

For the first time Linda smiled. The dark shadow in her eyes melted. She reached up both hands and held his homely face for long seconds. Then she kissed him.

"I want you to come back to me." Her voice was low-toned.

"Madre de Dios!" whispered Lupe. Tears welled in her eyes. "Ees love, Chico."

Dusty turned her the other way. "Is love, Lupe. No mistake. And you. Will you marry me if I come through this gun fight?"

"I already tell the padre that, my Chico. Before I leave La Paz."

The Cooper Kid took one of the saddle-guns from the rack. Nobody noticed him slip through the brush-screened entrance. Then they heard the Cooper Kid's voice—brittle, a little drunk.

"Who's got the guts to help me lay the ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes? Come along, you stinkin' Kansas. By the hell, you two Blanchards better not shoot to miss this time. You don't believe in ghosts, Sheriff Jack Duke? I'll show you the ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes!"

CHAPTER FIVE

I'll See Your Hand, Tinhorn!

IT TOOK Dusty Rhodes and Brick O'Neil a few tense minutes to understand what the Cooper Kid was up to. It sounded as if he were turning traitor, bringing those men into the Hidden Cave.

But that wasn't it. The Cooper Kid was mounted and down at the foot of the high brushy rock-strewn slope. He sat his horse on the wagon trail, talking to Sheriff Jack Duke and the two Blanchards and Kansas. He held a half empty bottle of tequila in his hand, and he was gesturing with it, pointing in the direction Jake Dusty Rhodes had been bushwhacked. The Cooper Kid was lifting his voice in drunken loudness.

"I sighted the ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes. Call me a liar. I'll gamble all I've got that every damned one of you will see Dusty Jake Rhodes' ghost. I'll gamble all I've got against the Rail Seven outfit. You're a gamblin' man, Jack Duke. You call that bet?"

"What the hell have you got to lose, Kid?" Sheriff Jack Duke's voice was loud enough to carry up to the four listeners.

"Somethin' you want. Somethin' the two Blanchards will shoot each other for. Somethin' that's got this stinkin' Kansas slobberin' like a mad dog. I've got my sister Linda and little Lupe hid where you'll never find 'em. And that, damn you all, will keep you from killin' the Cooper Kid! I asked you, Mister Sheriff Jack Duke—you want that bet?"

"I'll take it. You're locoed drunk, Kid. You don't make sense. You and Kansas killed Dusty Jake Rhodes. You've both admitted it. The two Blanchards saw Dusty's dead carcass. I don't believe in ghosts."

"Then I'll show you one."

Sheriff Jake Duke had a gun in his hand. His handsome swarthy skin faded to a yellowish color. Under flared black brows his yellow eyes cut quick looks at the Cooper Kid and Kansas, then at Clem and Randy Blanchard.

"If this is a guntrap you gents are fixing to spring on me, I'm killin' me two Blanchards now."

"Take a look at Kansas." The Cooper Kid was taking his spot in the sun. His fear was gone, and he was taunting them. "Take a look at Clem and Randy. They're as spooky as kids at a midnight boothill." The Cooper Kid laughed, and it sounded like glass smashing.

"Follow me to where Kansas and the Cooper Kid killed Dusty Jake Rhodes." The Cooper Kid's voice was sharp-edged. "You'll see his ghost ride on that same Rail Seven roan. Let's go!" The Cooper Kid lifted his bottle so that the slanting setting sun caught its glass and reflected the light like a signal mirror.

The Cooper Kid drank and motioned with his bottle. Dusty knew that the kid brother of Linda Cooper was leading those men towards the same bushwhacker trap where they had killed Dusty Jake Rhodes.

Linda's eyes were shining. For perhaps

the first time in her life the Cooper Kid was giving his older sister a chance to be proud of him.

"I say a little prayer for him, Linda," whispered Lupe. "Ees brave, the Keed." Then she turned to Dusty.

"The Rail Seven roan, and the Ranger's horse. They are picketed close to here. I have a Mexican do that last night. Get your saddles. Ride fast to the place where the Cooper Keed is taking those hombres. Get there first. Shoot them to kill them."

A few minutes later Dusty Rhodes and Texas Ranger Brick O'Neil were mounted. They headed along a shortcut to the place where Dusty Jake Rhodes had been bush-whacked. It was deserted when they got there. All they had to do was bush-up, kill off their men when they rode up. All they had to do was shoot from the bushwhacker safety of the brush and boulders.

Back yonder and safe inside the Hidden Cave sat Lupe and Linda. A candle was lighted to The Lady of Guadalupe. Prayers were on their lips, cold fear and dread in their women's hearts. They wanted their men back safe, whole. Otherwise life for them would be bleak.

Lupe would risk the mortal sin on her soul and kill herself if Dusty didn't come back. She had whispered that against Dusty's lips when she kissed him goodbye. And Linda had told the redheaded Ranger that her marriage to Jack Duke would never on earth be consummated. She'd said that if Brick O'Neil did not come back to her, her life was over and ended.

"Too bad we ain't got bushwhacker blood in us, Dusty." The big homely redheaded Ranger put it in words.

"Anyhow," grinned Dusty, "we got to win that bet for the Cooper Kid. Them gents has got to see the ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes, and take the sight of Dusty Jake Rhodes' ghost to hell with 'em. And there Dusty Jake will be waitin' to greet 'em. We can't lose, Brick."

"We can't lose, Dusty."

They sat their horses in behind the brush and waited, their guns in their hands.

As if they had talked it all over, the Cooper Kid led the four riders up out of the brush and into the open clearing. They had their guns in their hands. When they were out in the middle of the clearing the Cooper Kid motioned with his almost empty bottle.

"This is where we killed Dusty Jake Rhodes," he said. "We killed him dead. Didn't we, Kansas? Me'n you."

Kansas nodded. He was sweating. The booze was coming out of every pore in his clammy body. His bloodshot eyes were shifting.

"And Clem and Randy Blanchard shot to miss." The Cooper Kid's face was white and set and his buckteeth showed. "They done that to keep their damned hands clean of murder. That right, you two Blanchard sons?"

Clem and Randy swapped uneasy looks.

"We shot high," said Randy.

"But you're both guilty as hell." The Cooper Kid lifted his bottle.

"Sheriff Jack Duke," he said, "the tin-horn gambler that hides behind a law badge and hires fools to do his cattle rustlin' and killin'. Him, he's the dirtiest, lowest down son of us all. To him—*salud!*"

The Cooper Kid lifted the bottle and drained it. Then he sent it smashing against a boulder twenty feet away. When his empty hand came down it clawed at a six-shooter and the gun slid from its holster. It ended up pointed at Kansas.

"Now watch for the ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes as it rides out at the men that murdered him! Play your string out, Dusty!"

Dusty Rhodes rode out from behind the brush on the Rail Seven roan. The scar on his clean-shaven face was a livid ridge. A six-shooter showed in his hand. In those few seconds before their guns exploded like all hell torn loose, every man of them saw him. Every man of them thought he was staring at the ghost of the murdered Dusty Jake Rhodes.

It was enough to spoil the aim of the deadliest shot on earth. Dusty never gave them time to throw off the unnerving shock.

Clem Blanchard was the man who had cut the high card for Lupe. It was at the stocky Clem that Dusty aimed. His was the first shot fired. The heavy .45 slug tore through the ribs of Clem Blanchard's barrel chest.

The gun in Clem Blanchard's hand exploded and the bullet whined past Dusty's head. Clem slumped heavily over his saddlehorn and his hat came off as his head lobbed over. He pitched forward, head-

long, and landed with a dull heavy crash on the ground. His horse, like every horse in their Blanchard Rail Seven string, was gun-broke and the gelding never untracked. Clem Blanchard lay there near the horse's forelegs in a shapeless hulk.

TEXAS RANGER Brick O'Neil had jumped his horse out from behind the brush a split second before Dusty Rhodes fired the opening shot of the gun ruckus. He never pulled up. His charge was headlong and deadly. The big rawboned Texas Ranger stood high in his stirrups, a wide flat-lipped grin baring his white teeth, his hat slanted on his head.

"I'm Texas Ranger Brick O'Neil from Sacaton, Texas. I got you, Randy Blanchard. And you know why!"

It was shouted like a battle cry, and it spoiled Randy Blanchard's aim. Randy Blanchard was shooting as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his six-shooter and pull the trigger. But fear sent his shots wild.

Brick O'Neil wasn't missing. His first shot hit Randy's belly, a gutshot that doubled Randy up in the middle. The Ranger's second shot hit Randy Blanhcard in the face. Randy Blanchard's arms flailed and the gun flipped from his gun hand. He went reeling backwards in his saddle, and one leg came up limply as his body slid down the horse's flank. His left foot hung in the stirrup, and then the boot slid from the tapadero-covered stirrup, and the leg came down. Randy Blanchard lay on his back, spread-eagled.

The Cooper Kid, drunk on tequila, had his six-shooter pointed at Kansas. The hammer was cocked. His finger was on the trigger. He watched the fear glaze the bloodshot eyes of Kansas when he saw the ghost of the murdered Dusty Jake Rhodes. He waited until that fear registered in the eyes of Kansas.

Then the Cooper Kid laughed. It was a shrill laugh that knifed through the gunfire. He shot Kansas in the guts, and kept on shooting. The .45 slugs thudding into the big body of the man who had taught him to kill. He was laughing as he saw death slack the sweaty whiskered face and slump the big man in his saddle. The Cooper Kid sent his last bullet into the big dead hulk of Kansas when it hit the ground.

"You damned double-crossing, tow-headed, worthless whelp!"

Jack Duke's six-shooter spat fire. The bullet struck the Cooper Kid in the head and the Cooper Kid never knew what hit him. He was dead when he wilted down in the saddle and slid slowly to the ground. He lay there dead, still gripping the gun he had used on Kansas.

The nickeled sheriff's star on Jack Duke's black shirt glittered. He was cold-nerved now, deadly. And he was fast. He pointed his gun at the red head of the big Texas Ranger and pulled the trigger.

The .45 bullet kicked dust from the high-creased crown of the Ranger's Stetson hat. It drilled a hole through the 5X beaver felt just above the hatband. The Ranger was standing in his stirrups, with his horse at a run. He swayed like a drunken man as the bullet-drilled hat fell off. His long legs buckled at the knees and he sat down heavily and then went over backwards, legs in the air. He landed with a heavy crash.

The horse charged on, heading straight for Jack Duke where he sat his black gelding. The smoking silver-mounted six-shooter tilted up to throw down on the gun-slinging ghost of Dusty Jake Rhodes. He jumped his black horse out of the way of the riderless charging one. The shooting had spooked the Ranger's horse. The fear-spooked gelding was stampeding. Jack Duke spurred out of its blind path just in time.

Like in a wild nightmare Dusty Rhodes saw the Ranger shot from his saddle. He went cold inside. Deadly cold. He sat his roan Rail Seven gelding and his six-shooter was cocked.

Jack Duke reined his horse around, a handsome, black-haired, black-moustached man garbed in black and riding a black horse. He was like a living statue of death on horseback.

Dusty shot at that nickeled law badge. He saw it blink and jump and twist when the .45 slug hit it. He saw Jack Duke jerk in his black silver-mounted saddle, saw flame spew from the silver-mounted gun in the sheriff's hand, felt the burning, thudding, ripping impact of the bullet that creased his ribs.

Dusty was thrown sideways in his saddle. But his gun roared again and the black-shirted man lurched drunkenly, grabbing

the saddlehorn with his left hand, shooting. The bullets snarled and whined past Dusty. Dusty Rhodes kept shooting, pointing his gun at that bullet-warped law badge pinned to the black-silk shirt. As if by some unseen hand, his aim was true and deadly. Each bullet that was shot from the gun in Dusty Rhodes' hand hit that twisted metal badge. And each bullet tore and shattered the ribs and lungs inside.

Jack Duke was dying, dying hard. His clenched gritted teeth were bared. Blood spewed from his mouth. The bullet-twisted star no longer had any shape or lettering on it, and it was a meaningless chunk of metal, its nickel-plating knocked off. Then death glazed the yellow eyes. Jack Duke, high-stake gambler, thief and murderer by proxy, sheriff at La Paz, was dead. Dead in his saddle.

Dusty Rhodes rode up and reached out and grabbed the dead man's shoulder. The slumped black-clad body thudded to the ground.

Pain throbbed across Dusty's bullet-creased ribs but he did not feel it. He'd [illegible] the only pardner he ever had shot from his saddle. It chilled him inside, and it weighted his heart with lead. He would have to take the news of the big Ranger's death back to Linda Cooper. She would be harder to face than all the gun-slingers on earth. Dusty reined his horse slowly around.

The Ranger had moved. There where he lay sprawled on the ground, he was easing over slowly. Dusty had heard of dead men moving with some automatic reflex action.

But no dead man ever sat up! Only one gent named Lazarus in the Bible when the Lord said: *Take up thy bed and walk*. That was a Bible miracle.

Texas Ranger Brick O'Neil was sitting up, though. He was slowly feeling of his red-thatched skull. Then he looked with bloodshot eyes at his hands. Then he looked at the dead men. A faint grin spread over his homely face as Dusty reined up and stared down at him.

"Too bad they ain't alive to watch a Texas Ranger come back to life. That might spook 'em. Lucky Day for us ghosts!" Texas Ranger Brick O'Neil picked up his hat and shoved a bloody forefinger through the bullet hole in the crown.

They tied crude bandages on their bullet wounds. The Ranger's scalp was ripped, but the red Irish are thick-skulled.

They covered the Cooper Kid with his saddle blanket but left the others as they lay. Together they rode back to the Hidden Cave.

* * *

Brick O'Neil resigned from his Texas Ranger job. La Paz needed a sheriff. Brick O'Neil said he'd try to hold down the job. The Rail Seven was a big spread, even when it had two ramrods like Dusty Rhodes and Brick O'Neil to manage it. But with the rustling stomped out, the sheriff job at La Paz simmered down to nothing.

The Rail Seven belonged to Dusty Rhodes and Brick O'Neil. It was in Linda's name, and she signed it over to the two pardners. It was a wedding present, she told them.

It wasn't a double wedding. The Padre said that two weddings were better than one, because it made the wedding fiestas last longer. And the people of La Paz had need for a long and gay fiesta, now that they were freed from the ugly rule of Sheriff Jack Duke.

The Livestock Commission Company that had owned the Rail Seven told the two pardners to keep the outfit. They guaranteed them top prices if they would ship all their beef to their company.

Every year now, on their anniversary days, Dusty and Lupe, Brick and Linda, ride to the Hidden Cave. And there they have a sort of picnic.

On their way they stop at a big granite boulder. Dusty and Brick stand with their hats in their hands. Lupe and Linda kneel. On the granite boulder are the words:

HARRY COOPER.
WHO DIED BRAVELY SO THOSE
TO WHOM HE WAS PLEDGED
MIGHT LIVE.

And that is the saga of the ghost of Dusty Rhodes. And when the saga of Dusty Rhodes reached the Wyoming country, men who had known him listened. They had their own range war to tend to. So long as Dusty Rhodes did not return to take part in the Wyoming range war, they were content to let him alone. They were content to let the living Dusty Rhodes lay the ghost of the dead Dusy Rhodes.

THE END

By GIFF CHESHIRE

MAN ON THE RIMROCK

The two riders charged them, guns blazing a patchwork of red streaks. Mace landed shoulders first in the dirt as horses pounded over him. . . .

More sinister, Mace Goodnight swore, than the songs of the fabled sirens were the wagon-train troubador's lilting melodies that would lure a hundred honest emigrants to savage destruction, blazing the wild Oregon Trail with their whitening bones!

AT THIS hour the flaming sun seemed a ball resting on the cleanly ruled plane of the rimrock against a coppery sky. Because he was watching it, Mace Goodnight chanced to detect the man up there. He rode half a length behind Lovelace and the girl. When he gently lifted the rifle from his saddle boot, the man raised from behind a small rock and bounded toward the scarp break directly above him.

There was small protection on the high bluff-talus up there, and it was this show

of panic that decided Mace. He was a dead shot. Lifting the rifle, he aimed and fired. The man sprawled out flat on the talus and did not rise.

Lovelace's guitar music, for he was a riding troubadour, ceased in mid-phrase. The three horses skittered nervously on the flat below the rim. Mace jumped his mount toward the foot of the talus, leaped down and started climbing. He had dropped the rifle and his .44 was in his hand. Expecting a shot from above, he took what cover he could. There was no shot. He reached the top and saw he had put in a lucky one. There was a caved-in, bloody hole in the back of the man's matted head.

Mace lifted him and, half sliding, carried him down to the flat. Lovelace and Nancy Harlow had swung down, and in the distance Mace could see the lifting dust of the emigrant train. There was a look of horror on the girl's face, and Val Lovelace stared at Mace with surprise and sharp speculation mixed in his deep brown eyes.

"Why, you shot him in cold blood!" Nancy Harlow gasped.

"A rather grim sort of target practice, Goodnight!" Lovelace exploded.

Mace had laid the dead man on the sandy earth, and now he looked at him closely. The still face was grimy and whiskered. The glazed eyes were too close-set, and it was a predator's nose. A man off the back trails, who had been spying on them. Mace swung his attention to the guitar still slanted across Lovelace's broad chest. Sometimes Lovelace rode with it, strumming and singing in his rich baritone, and sometimes not.

"A white man with decent intentions wouldn't flatten behind a rock to watch us pass." Mace Goodnight brought his glance back to the girl, who was still looking at him in open revulsion. It saddened him a little, for she was a lovely thing, rather slight but well-molded, with a finely chiseled face set off by glossy black hair.

"You didn't even give him a chance to fight back!" Nancy raged. "Do you enjoy cold-blooded killing?"

Mace let out a breath that was almost a sigh. "Ma'am, he was trying to get away. In ten seconds more he would've made it. He didn't want a fight. He didn't figure to be seen, but when he was he had important business that told him to light his shuck. Ma'am, he's an outlaw, and your father's talked too much."

"Heroics!" snapped Lovelace. "A cheap, vicious attempt to impress Nancy!"

"Mebbe you better save your voice for your pretty singing," said Mace. It was a moment of deadly tension. "That's what you brought it along for, wasn't it?" That had to be it. The instrument was light in color, and would have been plainly visible from the rim. It could have spoken volumes to this dead man. Mace had gambled everything and killed the man because he believed it had.

For an instant Val Lovelace hung in indecision, dark things working behind the mask of his deceitfully amiable eyes. He was nearly as tall as Mace and a little broader. He had a soft-contoured, classic handsomeness, a wealth of soft wavy brown hair always sleekly combed so that its handsome dips were best displayed. He gave Mace a sharp appraisal and, turning, helped Nancy to mount. He swung onto his own horse, and they left toward the wagons at a stretched-out run.

With no audience, Mace let out a real sigh. He had learned to hate killing in the war, but there were times when it was a necessity. For several days now the emigrant train, so clearly dominated by the pompous Vincent Harlow, had been following the Central Oregon Emigrant Trail, across the endless rolling desert. It was pointed now toward deeply gorged Crooked River and Barney Prine's new settlement a day's travel beyond, before the swing across the new route over the high Cascade range.

A man driven by vanity, Vincent Harlow had worried Mace ever since he joined the train east of Grand Island. His clothes and expensive outfit proclaimed him for a rich man, and his loose talk made it doubly certain that nobody missed the fact. In evening camps or small talk on the trail, he liked to term himself a capitalist. The Oregon Country needed a man of his cut, he implied. This with the incautious way he displayed his ample funds told any thinking man that he carried considerable wealth with him.

Twice Mace Goodnight had spoken a warning, and twice had had been put in his place with a haughty stare. That alone had bothered Mace little. It was Val Lovelace who had lent the situation urgency.

It was a strange thing for a man to emigrate twice to the far West. Mace believed that Lovelace did not recall their other meeting at the refitting station Mace had been running in Nebraska territory since the war. Being a man who rarely forgot the features and manner and small animations of another, he was certain he had seen Lovelace with another party the season before. It was conceivable that a man could find reason for returning east then heading out again, but Lovelace stoutly insisted that it was his first time out.

Yet Mace's persistent though casual questioning had put an unclear concern in Val Lovelace. A deep antagonism had kindled between them at once, and it came from more than the fact that they were equally responsive to the charms of Vincent Harlow's lovely daughter. Mace had grown wary and nothing had happened to ease his mind.

Not until he had spotted this man, now dead, hidden high on the rimrock had Mace seen through it with compelling clarity. He recalled now that Lovelace had swiveled in the saddle, making the guitar clearly visible to the spy, turning back again a few seconds before Mace had lifted his rifle. Mace knew it had been a signal. The charming, ingratiating Lovelace was making it a practice to attach himself to trains in which he scented plunder.

He had outriders spotted in wild reaches such as this, and his guitar-playing in the saddle had been his means of identifying himself to them and conveying the information that the train was ripe for their picking, that he would be waiting for them and doing his part.

It was a thing that Mace could not prove, any more than he could prove the need for killing this man before he could get away with the information. Yet he knew that Lovelace realized plainly what was in his thoughts. As he had with Nancy just now, Lovelace would make the most of this with the rest of the party.

MACE mounted and, from the added elevation, saw that the wagons were drawing nearer. He would have to borrow a shovel from one of the farmers in the train and bury this dead spy. At this ad-

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vanced stage of western migration, trails were well established, and no guides were required. It was like Vincent Harlow to have more capable men elect him train captain. If he reacted as his daughter had, one Mace Goodnight was going to be in an uncomfortable position.

Mace rode to meet the slow-moving train, for the first time questioning the wisdom of his decision to move west. Yet his was an eternally restless nature, and he was no stranger to the prairies. When he was fifteen he had lost both his parents in a single epidemic. For many years his Uncle Jake Goodnight had trapped in the Rockies, from the headwaters of the Missouri down to Santa Fe. Though the industry had been dwindling rapidly since the early forties, Jake had kept on because he knew no other trade.

He had taken his nephew, and Mace Goodnight had grown up in the ways of the wilderness and frontier. Then had come the war between the states and Mace, at twenty, had enlisted in the Union Army. When he returned, he had found that Jake Goodnight was dead. Mace had moved out on the trail, then, and for three years had run a refitting station for the thousands of wagons on the Overland. He had prospered, but restlessness had grown in him again and, getting an unexpected chance to sell out, he had accepted and joined the next passing train for Oregon. It had been this one.

Three men rode out ahead of the train and as they approached, Mace saw it was Lovelace again, with Vincent Harlow and Colby Trask, a dour and silent farmer. He saw from his manner that Harlow was excited. Mace rolled a smoke and waited, annoyance turning him proddy.

"What's this, Goodnight?" Harlow shouted, as they rode up. "What's this I hear about you shooting some man?"

"You seem to have it clear enough!" snapped Mace. "I shot a man."

"But why? Just because some fellow happens to look at you, you kill him! An outright criminal act, sir, and I won't tolerate it in my train!"

"What do you figure to do?" asked Mace, letting cigarette smoke drift out of his mouth with the words.

"We're going to try you and we're going to hang you, Goodnight," said Val Lovelace. The speculative gaze he leveled at Mace had a dry amusement in it. "It was sheer murder, before two witnesses, even if you do have a cock-and-bull story to tell."

Mace shrugged. "I'm being neither tried nor hanged by the likes of you, Vincent Harlow," he said calmly. "You show-off fool, you're in danger. From your smooth pal, there, Val Lovelace. And the man I killed isn't the only one he's got up yonder. They'll be watching your outfit close, now. Somehow Lovelace'll get his message across. If you want to clean house, Harlow, there's where you ought to start."

"Preposterous!" snapped Harlow. He was a florid, fleshy man in his early fifties, dressed expensively in polished boots, riding breeches and tweed coat, topped with a hundred-dollar Stetson. Yet each of the three sensed now that Mace Goodnight would not submit to arrest without a scrap, and none of them cared to crowd the issue at the moment.

Mace turned his horse disdainfully and rode on toward the train. He got a shovel and returned to the dead man and buried him as the forty-wagon train pulled past. From the curious stares he knew that the news had spread throughout its length, though nobody turned off the trail toward where Mace worked.

MACE finished the distasteful job and let the train pull far ahead. A reasonable man would pull out right now he told himself. He had nothing but a pair of pack horses now trailing behind one of the wagons. At Prineville he could take the Dalles Military Road and enter the Willamette Valley via the Columbia River route, forgetting these people completely.

If he stayed he would have to kill Val Lovelace, be killed by him or weather a probable outlaw attack. His convictions in that regard were only heightened. It was not Nancy Harlow, who even yet could set his heart pounding, that obstructed decision. There were a hundred people in the train beside the Harlows, who would become the innocent victims of an attack. Doggedly Mace mounted and turned after the train.

Mace dallied behind the train for the rest of the afternoon, making his plans. He did not propose to leave Lovelace with the initiative but saw no way of seizing it from him. Lovelace's owlhoot crew would stay

under cover until the sign from him. The man would appear wholly harmless, falsely accused, until he felt the moment was right again. And it would be dead easy, for it was plain that Vincent Harlow trusted the man explicitly.

Yet Mace felt there was a hope that by moving quietly, he could get a few of the more seasoned men in the group to listen to him and be persuaded to be on guard.

Harlow had halted the train at a point where the trail touched and skirted a creek. When Mace rode in the men were unhitching horses and oxen, with women and children busily unloading camping equipment. He felt their hostility instantly. The Harlow wagons, he saw, were half down the length of the stretched-out vehicles, and he saw Val Lovelace talking intently with Nancy. Mace located his pack horses and led them boldly through the camp. He selected a site a few hundred yards above the uppermost wagon for his own camp.

By the time he had fixed and eaten his supper and cleaned up afterward, night had come on. If Lovelace hoped to drum up a mock trial and hanging, no move was made in that direction. Mace watched the emerging stars in worried thought. This terrain was like so much of the rest, open and rolling, broken frequently by great rock outcrops. A warm, sweet breeze rippled across the sage and chemiso. There was one scarp beyond the creek about a mile away. It struck him that Val Lovelace had probably suggested this campsite to Harlow.

A baby cried somewhere, and he supposed it was the Thornton youngster. All down the creek early bedders were scattering their blankets. Almost like a bunch of sheep, he thought.

He grew aware of footsteps and straightened up, hand on the grip of his gun. He saw then that it was Nancy Harlow, moving through the night toward his fire. He had intended, once the women and youngsters were in bed, to call a few picked men beyond earshot and talk to them. He hadn't included Nancy in the group. He watched her approach with a puzzled frown.

She stepped into the firelight and moved beyond him before she stopped. Then she turned. She kept her voice low. "Mace, father told me what you said about Val Lovelace. I know my father is far too much of a show-off and—well, I'd like to hear what you base that opinion on."

He regarded her gravely, stirred as he always was by her presence. Resentment rose in him, but he put that down quickly. He had to get somebody to listen, and if Nancy could be persuaded, she might counteract her father's prejudgment.

Stars hung peacefully above them. He let his gaze stray over her slim body; then he lifted his eyes to meet hers. "In the first place, the man lies when he claims he's never been out here before. I saw him last year. In the second—"

"There is no second, Goodnight!" a sharp voice said, behind him. "We figured you'd be dangerous to take, fella! Unbuckle that gunbelt and drop it and turn around!" It was Val Lovelace.

The glint of triumph in Nancy Harlow's eyes told Mace he had let himself be trapped like a fool. Disarmed by a woman's charms, while Val Lovelace had sneaked up behind him. He recalled now how she had stepped past him, so as to turn his back toward the main camp. Her talk had covered Lovelace's steps as he came the short distance from the closest wagon, behind Mace's back.

She deserved the advantage Mace took of her now. Inexperienced, she had not moved, and the three of them were on a line. In this position, Lovelace could not fire at Mace without endangering her. Aware of this, Mace spun, shoving himself aside as his hand slapped at his gun.

Though thrown off stride, Lovelace was deadly calm. He waited till Mace was out of line with Nancy, then fired, and Mace put an echo so close to the shot that the two seemed one. It was Val Lovelace who bent abruptly, rocked, then pitched to the ground.

"You vicious, cold-blooded beast!" Nancy cried, in a horrified voice.

"He's not dead, ma'am, but he'll have a sore belly for a few weeks if he lives." Mace stepped quickly and picked up the gun Lovelace had dropped.

"Shoot me!" said Nancy, in an outpour of disgust. "I lent myself to this so as not to endanger the camp! If you must have human blood to be happy, kill me next!"

"Ma'am, shut your pretty mouth," said Mace. He did not like shooting either, but it had been unavoidable. "Step back down the line, Nancy. I'm going to prove once

and for all what blasted idiots you've all been."

SHE OBEYED, and he saw at a glance that she was genuinely terrified by him. Lovelace had probably built him up as a monster. Men had come running, and now they formed a circle around Mace and the girl. Mace felt their animosity and his own isolation. He knew that pleading would accomplish nothing. He had to demonstrate, to build up a big play on what was only a powerful hunch. If he was wrong, had been wrong all along—! He shrugged. Years before he had learned that a man on the frontier had to rely on his instinct, which so often told him more than his outward senses.

His gaze picked up Vincent Harlow and settled there. The man had been shaken by the development, and much of the bluster was gone from him.

"Harlow!" Mace called, "was it Lovelace's suggestion you make camp here?"

"Why, yes. Why not? It's a good place."

Mace ignored him after that, turning his attention to men more like himself, though less experienced in the ways of the West. "What I did this afternoon I had to do. What I did tonight, I had to do, too. The rest of Lovelace's men're on that rim yonder, watching this camp. When it's asleep they'll hit it, shoot it up some, and try to get Harlow's money. That is, they will if they get the signal from Lovelace. I'm going to give 'em that signal."

"If you're right," blurted Harlow, "why should we invite attack?"

"Hear 'im out, Harlow!" a man responded. "That buzzard he killed this afternoon's worried me. In this country a white don't spy on a white unless he wants to get shot at. I got a wife and kids in this outfit. You been shooting off your big mouth ever since the Big Muddy. That Lovelace never did look right to me. Slippery, kind of. What you got in mind, Goodnight?"

"I'm going to take Lovelace's horse and guitar and hat and ride over there. I want Vincent Harlow to go with me. And I want the rest of you men to keep on your toes here in case something slips."

"Don't do it, Dad!" called Nancy Harlow. "It's just a scheme to get you out of camp! The man's insane, I tell you."

"Scared, Harlow?" asked Mace.

The man's bluster returned. "I'll go with you. But it's an idiotic idea."

Fifteen minutes later the pair forded the creek and splashed up on the far side. Rolling sage plain lay between them and the rim, and the obscured moon scarcely cast a shadow. Mace Goodnight had never shown Nancy Harlow, but he was some nimble on a guitar, himself. He rode with it slanted across his chest, as had been Lovelace's habit, his fingers silently caressing the strings. He had left an alerted camp behind, with Val Lovelace under guard.

Though what he faced was not inviting, he experienced another moment's dread that he might be proved entirely mistaken. Yet guiding instinct was still strong within him. He was banking much on the hunch that Lovelace would not employ a large gang. Three or four at the most, enough to hit hard and fast and accomplish their mission.

Though he felt responsibility for Vincent Harlow, his anger against the man was a cold thing. Harlow had a lesson to learn, if he was to survive in this country,

They came in under the rearing escarpment, riding its length, then back again, and as they traveled Mace plucked out the tune Lovelace had been playing that afternoon. He knew that they had been seen and he hoped they would think he was Lovelace.

They rode back to their starting point at the base of the rim, and Mace saw that Harlow had sunk down in the saddle. It gave him grim amusement. He wheeled his horse as riders came through the darkness where a long detritus slope led down from a small break in the rim. He dropped the guitar to the ground, whispered "Ready!" and pulled his gun.

He let them reach the flat, a hundred yards to the left, where they grew into more distinct shapes. When a soft voice called, "That you, Val?" he lifted his gun, cut down and fired.

Somebody cried, "Hell, it's a trap!" and followed it with an explosive curse of frustration. Mace's first shot lifted a man out of saddle, and the riderless horse cut across the open. There were three more shapes, one man more than Mace had figured on. Lead was whistling around them suddenly,

gunpowder exploding in the desert night. He emptied another saddle in the exact second in which Lovelace's hat left his head.

He saw to his surprise that Harlow had cooled into the fight and was shooting, though probably with little effect. Maybe it was only the man's colossal vanity or maybe it was real nerve.

The two remaining riders charged them, then, guns blazing a patchwork of red streaks in the night. Mace's own feeling was one of surprise rather than pain, when he left the saddle, landing shoulders first in the dirt as horses pounded over him. Many a horse spill had taught him the trick of landing limply, and he scrambled immediately to his feet. Harlow was standing in the stirrups now, an open target, but shooting like mad. A rider threw up his arms and pitched from his horse. Mace picked off the other.

All but one of them were dead, and that one was badly hit. Even under Mace's threatening gun this last one insisted that this had been the size of the wild bunch. Dying and heedless, he admitted in Harlow's hearing that Val Lovelace had been their leader. They brought this man back to camp to sprawl beside the still unconscious Lovelace.

In the firelight, Mace saw for the first time that blood was running down the side of Vincent Harlow's head. His own left shoulder was paralyzed, and there was work for the skilled fingers of one of the women.

Yet medical attention seemed to be the farthest thing from Harlow's thoughts. He let a thoughtful gaze travel around the group of watchers' and finally settle on Mace Goodnight.

"I played the fool," he said finally. Mace liked a man who could admit that. "The funny thing is, I'm not nearly the bigwig I like to make out. A show-off. Probably some of you others have more with you to attract an outlaw gang than I have. And it seems that Val Lovelace played the fool, too. I apologize to you people. I endangered you without realizing it. I hope you can forgive me." He turned then toward the woman who was waiting with a pan of hot water and bandages.

It was Nancy Harlow, and her face was grave. He stripped off his shirt and gritted his teeth while she did the chore. It was an expert job. When it was finished, she looked up at him.

"Mace, he's not the only one. I'm so terribly ashamed. I hope you'll take this train on through, and not think too harshly of us."

He chucked her under the chin, lifting her face and grinning at her. "Nancy, I don't plan to do any more thinking about it. I've got some music to make to you on Lovelace's guitar, if it didn't get smashed up. I've got some real *talking* to do, and that's the way to do it."

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October Issue—At Your Newsstand September 3!

DUMBO'S DOORKNOB BONANZA

By J. WALTON DOYLE

HASHHOUSE HANNIGAN was getting mad. The white bristles over his ears were beginning to take on a belligerent angle. But Jess Ludz didn't seem to notice.

Ludz said, "And I ain't makin' any bones about it, Shorty. I don't want you here in Plainsville. They's room for only one eatin' house here, an' I aim to see that it's mine. Savvy?" Ludz's tone, like the set of his face, was mean.

The bristles over Hashhouse's ears stood out a little straighter. His cheeks got a little redder. Now he came out from behind the counter of his Happy Gut Cafe, jerking off his apron as he came. He pulled up in

When Hashhouse Hannigan and his hole-in-the-head pardner, Dumbo, traded their hash-slingers' aprons for miners' red shirts, they were warned that their new outfits would set the gold-camp fashion in shrouds —with a pair of graves furnished free, by the Claim-Jump Combine!

front of Ludz, put his hands on his hips and glared up at the taller man.

"An' jest phwat it is ye'll be doin' to make me leave?"

Ludz's eyes narrowed. His head shoved forward a trifle as he returned Hashhouse's glare. "Don't go gettin' sassy, runt," he snarled. "Now look." He waved a menacing finger under Hashhouse's nose, "I'm givin' you a break. I'm offerin' you a hun'red dollars for your business. You agree to clear out, leave town complete, you get the hun'red. You try to stay, you don't get the hun'red. But, by God, you will get a beatin' you'll remember to yore dyin' day. See?"

Hashhouse stood looking up at the other man, his head tilted a little sideways. Ludz loked like the kind of a man who could back up his words, all right. Tall, wiry and big-fisted.

Hashhouse squinched up his eyes. "Why, ye long-legged spawn a the divil, 'tis the likes of yez phwat makes me mither turn in her grave, God rest her soul. An' 'tis a beatin' ye propose? Foosh! Ye're nought but a brayin' jackass."

Quick color rushed to Ludz's face. "Why, you—!" He reached for Hashhouse, one hand going for Hashhouse's face. It didn't look fair. Ludz was fifty pounds heavier, two heads taller and twenty years younger than Hashhouse.

But Ludz's hands never reached Hashhouse. There was a violent pinwheeling blur of fists and fast motion, the angry splatting sound of toughened fists exploding against flesh, and pain-filled grunts and groans.

Ludz backed frantically away from this unholy buzz-saw of fists, and crashed into a shelf of crockery. Then Hashhouse worked Ludz around until he had him lined up with the front door, paused a brief instant, grabbed a deep lungful of air. "Whoosh!" he exploded, and unleashed a sizzling right.

Ludz catapulted out backwards through the front door, rather painfully, inasmuch as the door was closed.

His flying body grazed the bottom of the hitch rail, plunged on into the dust in the street.

Hashhouse followed him out. Standing on the boardwalk, he shook one of those knuckly buns of bone and flesh at Ludz as he crawled away on his hands and knees, peering over his shoulder fearfully.

"Ye lilly-livered lout!" Hashhouse roared. "Kim back here an' give me that beatin' ye was promisin'."

Ludz wasn't exactly in the mood to keep promises right now, and he got to his feet and disappeared around the corner at a staggering run.

Nate Slocum, who was standing in the doorway of his livery barn next door to Hashhouse's cafe, called over to Hashhouse.

"You shore gave him a workin' over, all right, from the looks of it. And mebbe he had it comin'. But, partner, you've let poreself in for a bad time, I'm afeered. I reckon you ain't been in Plainsville long enough to know just how mean Jess Ludz can be when he's crossed. If I was you, I'd shore as hell light out of here and hunt me a new stampin' ground."

Hashhouse snorted derisively. "Tis more than the likes of a long-geared bag a wind like him what'll make me leave," he said, and stamped back into his eating house.

He surveyed the damage disgustedly, then set to work cleaning it up. He was back in the kitchen when Dumbo came in.

Dumbo was huge, half-witted and happy-go-lucky. But, in spite of that, he was the apple of Hashhouse's eye. And, occasionally the cinder.

Hashhouse had taken the big simpleton under his wing back quite a spell, and had kept Dumbo clothed, fed, and, as much as possible, out of trouble. He couldn't have treated his own son better, if he'd had a son. And through the years, Dumbo dutifully followed Hashhouse through the score of eating houses he'd operated, and reciprocated by dishwashing, spud-peeling, and any other chore Hashhouse might set him to.

Hashhouse's temper was still throwing off sparks. Now he said, "An' where the hill it it ye've been? I sent ye after that stew meat a full hour ago. Ye'll no be makin' me believe it takes that long to walk two blocks."

DUMBO hung his big-eared head. "Aw," he said, then laid the package of newspaper-wrapped meat on the table.

"Ye're runnin' over with excuses," Hashhouse told him caustically. Then he

caught sight of the apple-sized bulge in Dumbo's levis pocket.

He stepped squarely in front of the big fellow. "So. Who is it ye been pilferin' from, this time?" He held out his hand. "Give it here!" he commanded.

"Aw," Dumbo said, avoiding Hashhouse's eyes. But he dutifully dug in his pocket and pulled out the lump, handed it to Hashhouse.

"Arrrh!" Hashhouse growled, looking down at the shiny, black doorknob in his hand. "Ye shamless baboon. I'm tellin' it straight, ye've got to stop this stealin'. Why, people are thrown in jail for the likes of this."

"Aw," Dumbo said again. "It ain't neither stealin'. It's collectin'. That's what. Collectin'. It's a—it's a—"

"I know," Hashohuse put in flatly, looking at the small box under the table that was brim-full of assorted doorknobs. "'Tis a hobby, accordin' to yere lights. But, mind ye, ye keep on makin' off with people's doorknobs, ye'll hobby yeresself right into the hoosegow."

He tossed the doorknob in the box with the others and sighed resignedly. There wasn't much use arguing with the big simpleton. He knew that from past experience. Dumbo's one-cylinder mind had a way of fastening on a thing, with no half-way measures. It would have to run its course, that was all. Still, Hashhouse reflected, it wasn't half as bad as his other habit of collecting full whiskey bottles, then seeing how unfull he could make them.

After the lunch-hour rush, Hashhouse got hold of a carpenter and had him hang a new front door. It was while the carpenter was doing this that a white-bearded oldster rode up and stopped out front. His tattered clothes and the pack burro he was leading spelled "prospector."

He got down from his shaggy horse wearily, tied the horse and burro to the hitchrail, then limped across the walk and entered the Happy Gut Cafe.

"Well, saints he praised!" Hashhouse chortled gleefully, rushing out from behind the counter and shaking both of the oldster's hands at once. "How is it ye are, Riley? Ye old pack rat."

The old man grinned weakly. "Tired," he said, sounding it. "Tired, and a little sick."

"Foosh! What ye need is some food in yere belly. Bet ye ain't et nothin' but beans for a month. Here, set up to the counter. I'll fetch ye some vittles."

The old fellow ate half-heartedly, finally pushed back his plate.

"Ye shure as hill left yere appetite along the wayside," Hashhouse opined.

The old fellow nodded agreement. "Hashhouse, I've got a feelin' in me bones than I'm not long for this world." He paused, coughed hollowly, his old eyes watering with the pain in his chest. "I'd shure admire to be seein' of me datter down in Denver afore the leprechauns come for me."

"That's aisy," Hashhouse told him. "Git on the evenin' stage an' high-tail it."

The old fellow shook his head. "Not so aisy as that, Hashhouse. Ye see, it's beholden I am to ye, already, for grubstakin' me last time. An' it's broke I am besides."

Hashhouse reached for his wallet. "Ye lamed-brain old scut. Ye'll no be wantin' to see yere young'n for the lack of a few dollars."

Tears of gratitude came to the old man's eyes as Hashhouse laid the bills before him. "Ye're a true son of Erin," he said. Then he pulled a grubby paper from his pocket. "Look, ye, now. They's a claim I been workin' on up in yonder hills. It shows a mite of color. With time an' more work, 'tis liable to be a strike. I'd like for ye to have it."

Hashhouse took the paper, more to please the old man than anything else. Lure of the yellow metal had never gained a hold on him, although he had owned eating houses in some mighty rich mining camps at different times. Soon enough, he reasoned, a man's time would come, and he'd be buried in a hole. Why spend most of your life grubbing in one?

He bought the old fellow a new outfit of clothes, put a wad of money in his pocket and saw him off on the evening stage.

In the lean-to room back of the cafe, he and Dumbo slept well that night. But they awoke to catastrophe. A cat-sized black-and-white striped catastrophe. Hashhouse first glimpsed it after he had entered the kitchen and was laying a fire in the range.

He took one look, held his nose and hurled a dish at it "Git!" he yelped.

The polecat swapped ends with remarkable speed, and turned loose.

Hashhouse stood gagging for air. Then his temper took fire. Grabbing up a stick of stove wood, and swearing a blue froth, he took off after the offending trespasser.

Hashhouse's aim with the stovewood club wasn't too good. He only succeeded in wrecking the inside of his restaurant and scaring the polecat to a new high.

DUMBO, hearing the clamor, came in the back door. The polecat, seeing a way of escape, whizzed out between Dumbo's legs.

Hashhouse tore off his clothes and dived into the half-hogshead he used as a dishwashing sink. Spluttering and cussing, he tried vainly to clean himself.

Still in the doorway where the air was a bit thinner, Dumbo stood mumbling a meaningless jumble of sounds, his eyes vacantly watching Hashhouse. He was composing a "pome," a queer habit he had whenever greatly disturbed.

"The kitty was purty, but not his stink.
Which makes me wonder, even think
Somebody's played a trick on you.
An' I got a idee that I know who."

With an angry squall, Hashhouse leaped out of the hogshead, spraying water in every direction. "Jess Ludz!" he yelped.

"Yup," Dumbo said.

"That dirthy, heathenish, low-down, skunk puttin'—!" Hashhouse broke off his raging scream, started diving into his clothes, not bothering to wipe the cold dishwater from him.

He tore down the street toward Jess Ludz's Golden Wheel Restaurant. Dumbo legged it along a few paces in the rear, a vacant grin on his face and a pungent odor in his wake.

It was still quite early, and few people were on the street. But those who were, quickly made for the other side of the street.

Ludz's Golden Wheel Restaurant was well named. He had bought an enormous freight wagon wheel, had sawed it in half, then mounted the halves in front of his place, one half on each of the two swinging doors. The wheels were gilded with gold paint, and inside the severed wheel hub, two big polished brass doorknobs stuck out, one for each door.

Hashhouse shoved through the doors and they swung to behind him. But Dumbo's feet faltered, then halted. His eyes glittered as bright as the doorknobs as he stood looking at them. He licked his lips hungrily.

Inside, Hashhouse made for the kitchen, his anger blinding him to the fact that the sheriff was sitting at the counter eating breakfast.

The sheriff gagged as Hashhouse wisked by, then jumped off his stool, made a grab at Hashhouse. "Whoa!" he ordered, jerking Hashhouse to an abrupt halt. "Where you think you—?"

But Hashhouse wasn't to be kept from his due. He balled a fist and popped the sheriff on the nose, turned and kept on going toward the kitchen. The lawman did a standing pin-wheel, grabbed hold of the counter. He shook his head, blinked his eyes, then took off after Hashhouse.

Hashhouse had already located his quarry. Hell and all fury took hold in the kitchen. Out of the uproar Jess Ludz burst forth, his face ghostly pale, his mouth wide and full of scared curses. Hashhouse was right at his heels, a frying pan in one hand, a meat cleaver in the other.

Hashhouse was closing on Ludz fast. It was a good thing the sheriff did what he did, or Hashhouse would have had a murder charge to face.

The lawman made a quick, skidding turn as Ludz and Hashhouse tore by him. He pulled his gun even as he was changing direction, and he let Hashhouse have the barrel right on the back of the head.

Hashhouse slowed to a walk, faltered, then pitched forward to the floor.

When he came to, he had been dragged outside and was lying on the boardwalk. He opened his eyes. A circle of curious faces peared down at him. Some of the faces had fingers attached to the noses.

Then Hashhouse became aware of the handcuffs on his wrists. He scrambled to his feet and shoved his face close to the sheriff's.

"Now looky here," he growled. "Ye've got no call to go buttin' in. This here's a private squabble."

The lawman shook a finger under Hashhouse's nose. "That," he said harshly, "Is what you think. By rights, I oughta throw you in the crummy for disturbin' the peace, not to mention assault and battery and attempted murder with a deadly weapon. But

seein' as I got the interests of the community to look out for, I can't afford to smell up my jail. I'm goin' easy on you. You got just one hour—mind, now, one hour—to high-tail it outa town. And take that half-wit with you. And get this. I ever ketch you inside Gold County agin, I'll throw you in solitaire on bread an' water for a solid year. Understand?"

"Why, ye dirthy, badge-heavy gawk!" Hashhouse stormed. "An' ye calls yereself a lawman, a preserver of the peace! Ye're a sinful shame to the very—"

"Now listen!" the sheriff roared. "I'll have you know—"

"Ye domn right I'll listen. An' what I want to know is how much that skunk-slingin' Jess Ludz paid ye to do this?"

"A hundred doll—" the sheriff said before he could stop the words. His face darkened, the corners of his mouth turned down. He hit Hashhouse across the face with the back of his hand. "One hour! You hear? One hour. And, by God, if you're in town later than that, you'll wish you'd never been borned!"

HASHHOUSE stood there quivering with wrath. He turned slowly and faced Ludz. Ludz backed away a step.

"Ye yeller-gutted spawn a Satan!" Hashhouse said, his voice curdling the words. "'Tis even with ye I'll be a gettin', if I have to live to be a hundred an' ninety years old."

He turned back to the sheriff, held out his hands. The lawman fitted the key to the handcuffs, loosened them. Then Hashhouse whirled, pushed roughly through the crowd and went back to the street.

If is mind hadn't been wholly taken up with anger he might have thought it queer that Dumbo hadn't been around as he usually was when Hashhouse got in a fight. Then, he saw Dumbo sitting on the edge of the boardwalk in front of the cafe.

Dumbo got up slowly, his arms folded across his stomach to hide the two lumps bulging underneath his shirt.

"Well," Hashhouse said, "Phwat the hill is it ye've been doin' while I nearly got kilt?"

"Nuthin'," Dumbo replied innocently.

"Arrrh!" Hashhouse growled, and went on inside.

Dumbo's "nuthin'" was just now being discovered down the street in front of Ludz's Restaurant. Jess Ludz was having a bit of trouble entering his place. Oddly enough, the outside doorknobs had disappeared.

Hashhouse stood in the center of the room, his eyes roving over what had once been his homey eating house. The place was a shambles. What hadn't been annointed by the polecat had been broken. There weren't enough whole pieces of anything to fill a bushel basket.

His shoulders sagging, Hashhouse sighed. Every cent, with the exception of a few dollars change in the till, had been tied up here. "'Tisn't much better a job Ludz coulda done by settin' fire to me place," he muttered dolefully.

He called to Dumbo. When the big fellow came in, still hugging his shirt front, Hashhouse said, "Go next door to the livery. Git that donkey and hoss that old Dad Riley left behind. We're leavin'."

Dumbo looked chagrined. "Kin I take my doorknobs?"

"I don't give a domn if ye strip the whole town of 'em an' tote 'em along," Hashhouse told him. "Now go git them animals."

Old Dad Riley's pick, shovel and gold pan, a few groceries bought with Hashhouse's remaining money, blankets and a gunny sack a third full of doorknobs all loaded on the pack burro, Hashhouse and Dumbo left town a half hour later, riding double on the scraggly mare.

Hashhouse's head was hunched forward, his chin resting on his chest, his thoughts hitting the very bottom of the slough of despond. *Where, can we head now?* The outlook was far from bright.

Hashhouse had headed the horse toward the pine-studded foothills fifteen miles away. They had covered about half that distance when he came out of his sombre revery to take a smoke. As his hand reached into his shirt pocket for the makings, he felt the claim sheet that old Dad Riley had given him the day before. He pulled up and looked at it.

"Well I'll be domned!" he said, a speculative tone in his voice. "Now mebbe—" He studied the foothills ahead thoughtfully. "Mebbe," he muttered again, then punched the mare in the ribs with his boot heels.

He had a little trouble finding the claim, but finally came across it nestled back in a

little valley. One side of it was bordered by a small creek, the other side by a gently sloping hillside dotted with jackpines.

It was almost dark when they found the claim. Hashhouse was up and down in the prospect hole before sun-up the next morning. He lugged dirt from the hole, washed it at the creek, then went back for another load. Dumbo offered to help, but Hashhaouse shooed him away. "Stay out from underfoot, now. 'Tis a busy man I am." By noon, he had sweat on his brow, blisters on his hands—but no gold.

"Oh, me achin' back!" he said finally, straightening and wiping his face with a bandana. He shook his head moodily. "'Tis some color here, Riley said. But, what color?"

After lunch and a short rest he went back at it again. By nightfall he still had no gold.

SUPPER over, he sat hunkered down on his heels, staring morosely into the campfire. Complete discouragement was in every line of his squat body. "Gold," he muttered disgustedly. "Arrrrh!"

Across the fire, Dumbo also squatted on his heels, happily and tenderly going over his collection of doorknobs, completely absorbed in his hobby. Occasionally, his vacant eyes would look up, study Hashhouse a moment. Finally he put his doorknobs away in the gunny sack, and sat staring into the fire, too, muttering under his breath every once in a while.

Dumbo was lost in the throes of composing a "pome," but Hashhouse was too weary and low in spirits to wonder what Dumbo would come up with. Nodding, half-asleep, Hashhouse was suddenly startled awake by Dumbo's loud shout.

"Dumbo got it! Dumbo got it!" the big fellow yelled, jumping to his feet and clapping his hands.

Hashhouse blinked sleepily, looked up at Dumbo. "Shoot, then," he said.

Dumbo closed his eyes, clasped his hands behind him, then recited slowly:

"Hashhouse, yore a very nice man.
Don't you worry if they's no gold inna pan
I'll sell my doorknobs for lotsa money,
An' buy you a eatin' house that's really a honey."

"Arrrrh!" Hashhouse snorted disgustedly, then kicked off his boots and rolled into his blankets.

Dumbo looked across the fire at him, a worried light in his eyes. It was a long time before he rolled up in his own blankets alongside Hashhouse.

When Hashhouse awoke the next morning, he turned and looked toward Dumbo's blankets.

"That dim-witted dumb-head," Hashhouse sputtered worriedly, grabbing for his boots. "Now where the hill do ye s'pose he's gone to?"

Then he remembered the supreme sacrifice Dumbo had offered to make on his behalf. "Oh me!" Hashhouse sighed. "I shoulda knowed he was havin' another brain-storm, an' kept a eye on him."

But as he turned around a movement down by the creek attracted his attention. "Dumbo!"

Sure enough, it was Dumbo. Hunkered on his heels down by the creek, very busy.

Hashhouse hurried towards him. Dumbo had the prospecting pan and was washing a panful of dirt.

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"Ye're wastin' of yere time, my lad," Hashhouse told him. "Gold is the last thing this here ground has in it. "C'mon. Let's eat an' git."

Dumbo paid no attention. He said, "purty."

"Eh?" Hashhouse said, "Phwat's purty?"

Dumbo extended a long, knuckly first finger, pointed down into the pan. Hashhouse stepped closer, peered over Dumbo's shoulder.

"Holy old mither of saints!" he yelped. "Where in the name a time did ye git that?" He grabbed the pan away from Dumbo, held it close under his nose, his eyes fairly bugging.

Dumbo pointed to a shallow hole a few feet away where a shovel handle protruded from the ground. "There," he said.

"Gold!" Hashhouse muttered in an awe-stricken voice, stirring a finger in the pan. "Jest look at that, would ye? Domned near a whole teaspoon full!"

Hashhouse forgot all about breakfast. His hurried trips to the creek throughout the morning were all made on the run. By noon, he was close to exhaustion, but his eyes were bright with fever—gold fever. And he had a tobacco sack nearly full of the heavy metal, all in fine, flaky grains.

He was so intent on his new-found wealth that he didn't hear the approaching rider. The fellow was lean, lanky and cow-waddy dressed. He pulled up his horse nearby and got down, crossed to where Hashhouse was squatted by the creek, busily whirling water and dirt from his pan.

The waddy tilted his head, peered over Hashhouse's shoulder. His head suddenly shot out. He leaned closer. "My God!" he cried, his eyes popping.

Straightening with a jerk, he whirled around and started off at a tearing run toward his horse, his bowlegs fast-moving parentheses.

Startled, Hashhouse jumped to his feet. By now, the waddy was on his horse and abusing it to greater speed down the valley.

Watching him go, Hashhouse groaned. "Domn!" he muttered. "Domn! 'Tis company we'll be havin'. Lots of it, all an' within the day."

Standing nearby, Dumbo asked, "Why did the man run away?"

"Don't worry," Hashhouse told him. He'll be back. An' he'll bring half the population of the state with him."

Hashhouse's prediction was conservative. An hour before sundown he saw the distant fast-approaching dust cloud down the valley. "Well, here they come, the dirthy, stinkin', money-grubbin' heathens," he muttered. "Now 'tis no peace we'll have."

Still, he reflected, if this strike proved rich, a town would spring up here. He would become rich and famous. The town might even carry his name. Hanniganville. Ah, now there was a name for ye. And of course, he would be mayor, besides owning most of the town, including a huge eating house with wall-to-wall carpet and gold-plated dishes.

HE WAS still deep in his rosy-hued day-dream when the first group of panting, wild-eyed claim-seekers arrived. Hashhouse, being a generous man by nature, took time off to show them his gold dust, and told them, "Now looky here. 'Tis no hog I am. Stake yereselves a claim anywhere ye want. Jest don't try to jump mine. We'll git along."

By nightfall the surrounding hillside was dotted with small rock cairns, marking the claim boundaries, and the darkness was jeweled with an ever-increasing number of campfires.

But mid-morning Hashhouse had an unwelcome visitor. Dumbo was in the hole, digging. Hashhouse was at the stream, panning. He got off his horse and walked toward Hashhouse with a wary stiffness.

Hearing the newcomer's footsteps, Hashhouse turned his head. Then he dropped the pan, sprang to his feet, his eyes narrowing and his face reddening with quick anger.

"So" He advanced on the newcomer menacingly. "Ye've heard. And ye've come. Well, when I git through workin' ye over, ye'll be in no shape to dig gold, or nought else, for that matter."

Jess Ludz's dark face paled a trifle. He halted, then started backing away. "Now wait a minute, old timer," he said entreatingly, holding up his hand. "You got good sense, you'll listen to what I've got to say."

Hashhouse cocked a fist. "Ye've nothin' to say I care to hear, ye low-life monger of

bad news. If ye'll open that mouth, I'll—"

"Now wait!" Ludz said, eyeing the cocked fist warily. "What I got to say is for yore good. You better listen."

"Arrrh! Git on with it, then."

A sly gleam came to Ludz's eyes. "That's better," he said. "Now look. Remember what the sheriff told you yesterday? He said if he found you in Gold County again, he'd throw you in the pokey for a year. He ain't the kind to say things without meanin' 'em."

"Why, ye dirthy, tale-carryin'—"

"Take it easy," Ludz cautioned, a sneer in his voice. He saw that Hashhouse was getting the drift. "You're still in Gold County, if you don't happen to know it. And the sheriff's on his way out here with a deputy."

Hashhouse's fists balled and unballed. The fence of bristles over his ears started rising. Anger and despair came to him. It was a neat bit of skullduggery to get his claim away from him. Yet he was powerless to stop it. They had the law on their side. If the sheriff caught up with him, he could make good his threat and keep him under arrest for a year—or long enough for the two of them to get his claim.

Blinded with rage, he lashed out, clipped Ludz on the jaw. Ludz flipped endo, lit hard, wind blasting out of him. He rolled over, blood running from the corner of his snarling mouth. As he rolled, his hand came up filled with a gun. He crawled to his feet, the gun leveled straight at Hashhouse.

"By God! You try that again, I'll blast you, so help me," he shouted. "Now listen. The sheriff's twenty minutes behind me. I'm givin' you a chance to high-tail it. But first, I want the deed to yore claim. See?"

"Ye foul scut!" Hashhouse scathed.

"Shut up!" Ludz ordered. "I want yore claim, but I'll take it, legal like, bein' an honest man. I'll pay you eight thousand dollars cold cash. And don't try to make me raise the ante, 'cause that's the top. See?"

"Arrrh!" Hashhouse roared, advancing on Ludz again.

Ludz rammed the barrel of his gun deep into Hashhouse's middle. "Better decide fast, shorty. The sheriff'll be here pronto."

Hashhouse halted, his shoulders sagging as bitter frustration ran through him. He knew there was no escaping the trap they had set.

"An' how the hill would I know ye're filthy money ain't counterfit?" he asked dully.

Ludz grinned evilly. "It ain't, if that's what's worryin' you. I sold my restaurant last night when I heard about this strike. Got five thousand cash for—" Ludz broke off his words, and there was an uneasy look on his face.

"Ha!" Hashhouse snorted. "So ye've only got five thousand. But ye offer me eight. Then the sheriff's makin' up the other three thousand?"

"Well what if he is?" Ludz snarled. "Any way you look at it, yore goose is cooked here. And yore damned lucky him an me are so all-fired gen'rous to pay you anything. You keep on jawin', I'll change my mind. See?"

Hashhouse shrugged resignedly. "All right," he said woefully. "Gimme the money."

Ludz pulled out a fat roll of bills, but held the roll close to him. "The bill of sale, first, runt."

Hashhouse took the claim sheet from his pocket. Scribbling a hasty bill-of-sale on the back of it, he handed it over to Ludz and took the roll of bills.

As Ludz gleefully stuck the claim sheet into his pocket, he was off-guard for a moment. Hashhouse grabbed his arm, twisted the gun free from his hand, then blasted a fist square into the middle of Ludz's face. Ludz flipped backwards again, fell full length. And this time he didn't get up.

Hashhouse tossed the gun on the ground besides the unconscious Ludz, turned and walked away. As he passed the prospect hole, he said, "C'mon, Dumbo. We're pullin' out."

In a few minutes, he and Dumbo, riding double on the shaggy mare, disappeared around a bend up the valley, leading the pack burro. Anger and bitterness were also riding a double saddle in Hashhouse's mind.

By nightfall they had covered ten miles and had crossed Tarry Creek. They were out of Gold County, over in Hackmore County. At least, Hashhouse thought dismally as he cooked supper over the camp-

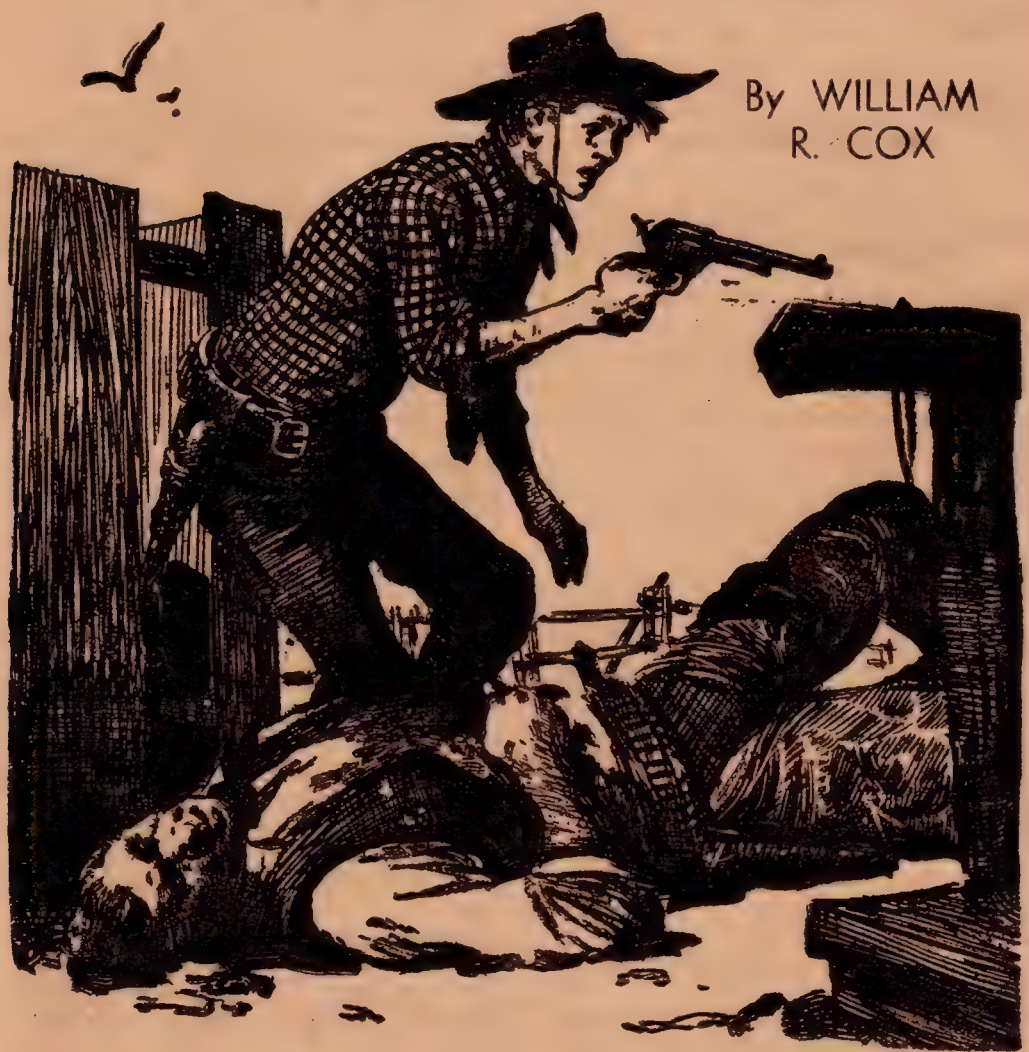
(Continued on page 94)

COMEBACK OF THE CROSSFIRE KID

Brand him outcast, kick him out of town if they would, but they could never kill Joe Hatchet's stubborn streak of pride which drove him back there for a deadline pay-off. And now, in that rigged death-trap, with enemy guns blasting in his face and the .45's of his killer companions crashing at his back, he fought bitterly on—too damned proud to die!

A Smashing Novelette of Frontier Fighting Men

By WILLIAM R. COX



CHAPTER ONE

Die, Rebel!

IN THE YEAR 1867 the country was rife with feuds and turmoil from the War, but the town of Hope seemed peaceful enough.

In those early days the town consisted of a general store, two decent houses, several lesser houses and a barroom.

Ban Snare owned the Jingle Bar and the largest house. They called him Old Ban because he had a son, Young Ban. Old Ban

He shot one through the arm, another through the leg. His white face was a mask in which his eyes burned with a terrible fire. . . .

was only forty. He was a grizzled forty, however, and the death of his wife left him cold and harsh and ambitious only to garner money.

Young Ban was fifteen; he was already burly, like his father, and he knew too much about barroom tricks, but he was an engaging youth in many ways. Boys worked in those days and already he was tending bar afternoons.

The other important house—with glass windows—was owned by Pres Moran, the storekeeper. Pres was married to a New England woman and had also been in the war. It was amazing that these two sour people should produce a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed little girl called Lucy, a bright, clever little girl beloved by all.

Hope, like most Arizona towns, lived off cattle. The big rancher was Ed Hatchet. He also had a fifteen-year-old son and was a widower. He was a lean, easy-going man, open-hearted and open-handed. He had fought through the War too, but on the Southern side.

Snare and Moran had been Yankee soldiers.

Ed Hatchet bought his supplies from Pres Moran and spent his money freely in Ban Snare's bar, and none spoke of the late unpleasantness. Joe Hatchet, a whipcord and whalebone lad of medium size, saddle-toughened, bred to gun and horse and cattle, followed Ed around and worshipped him. Young Ban Snare was his best friend, each were dimly aware of the ten-year-old Lucy as the prettiest girl in the county.

The Fall roundup was amazing. The Territory was not yet filled up and the cows of Bar Cross had dropped calves during the war years with little attention from the few Mexican vaqueros who had been left in charge by Ed Hatchet. When the tally was completed and the cattle sold, the sum of money resulting was fantastic to a simple soul like Hatchet.

There were plenty of cows and bulls left, so Ed immediately laid plans. He called in young Joe and projected a trip, to the East, where he had been a prisoner of war, to New York, and Washington. He took Joe into town and bought him new clothing and packed his bundle of notes in saddlebags and got a couple of fine, new quarter horses and made ready to ride to the nearest railhead.

He spoke of it happily in the Jingle Bar, throwing one last ringding for the men he knew in Hope. Several smaller ranchers were in and the party became general and the fun was fine.

Joe found Lucy Moran playing the spinnet, not too well and rather self-consciously. She was attired in her Sunday best although it was only Wednesday. She was a pert girl, with blue eyes which went quickly from the keys of the instrument to Joe in a way which made him, quite unaccountably, turn red.

Joe said, "Reckon I hadda come by. We're leavin' at sun-up."

"It's mighty good to see you," said she primly.

He fumbled with a paper sack. "Pep-'mints," he said. "I brung 'em for you." He proffered the sweets, took a large one for himself. He put his hat on the floor—it was a new, flat-crowned beaver from the mail order house. At ease after the ice was broken, he said, "We are really goin' to have a trip. Pop says we might even go to Yurrop if we're so minded. On a boat."

"I've never seen a boat," she said breathlessly.

"Me neither," he sighed. "Pop's the greatest man in the world to even think of sech a thing, I reckon."

"He is awful good to people," she said. "I like him."

"I reckon everybody likes him," he nodded.

A slight shadow passed over the young, clever face of the girl. "Um-*h'mmm*," she said, and Joe caught the inflection at once.

He said quickly, "You mean someone don't like my pop? You jest tell me who it is, Lucy. You jest tell me."

She said primly, "I didn't say anything, Joe Hatchet, and you mind your temper. You know you got a terrible temper."

Joe said wildly, "If anybody so much as winks at my pop I'll—I'll—I'll shoot his eye out so he never winks again, lemme tell you." It was the empty bragging of childhood, an expression of his deep love for his father, but the girl was young enough to frighten.

She said, "You get right out of here, Joe Hatchet. You can't talk like that in here. My mom won't stand for talk about guns and shooting. Take your old candy and get out, now."

He swept his new hat from the floor and arose in a lordly manner. He said, "Huh. You bet yore life I'll go. And you kin keep the ole candy, too, you fresh young button."

He went out of the door. That is how he came to be standing on Mesa Street when it happened.

IT WAS a clear afternoon, with the sun going down over Old Mesa and Young Mesa bathed in the purple and gold of the Arizona evening. It was about four-thirty and autumn was beginning. The unpainted buildings of Hope were softly limned in this light and Joe Hatchet felt a twinge of loneliness at the thought of being gone for a whole year.

The two fine horses were hitched to the rack in front of the Jingle Bar. Ed and Joe had taken them for a short canter to loosen them up for the long ride tomorrow. Young Ban Snare came out of the barroom and walked slowly down toward Joe.

"Some hat!" hooted Ban.

Joe said, "Say, Ban. I jest heard they was people in this town don't like my pop. You know any of 'em?"

Ban had a heavy, square face and squinting small eyes. He said slowly, "We-ell. It ain't they don't like you-all. Only it's jest—well ye're Rebels."

"What's thet?" demanded Joe scournfully.

"Well, yawl lost the War. And now you got all the money in the world and us Yankees, which won the war, we take second place in the Hope country." Young Ban was obviously repeating something his elders had said. Even Joe could see this. He knew Ban too well to think his friend had thought this up himself. It was baffling.

Joe lowered his head like a young bull. He said, "Well, you tell anybody talks like of that they kin answer t' me."

Young Ban laughed. He said, "Shoot, Joe. I ain't said it."

"Well, you better not," said Joe darkly. Thoughts of anyone speaking against his wonderful, easy-going father made him see red. Lucy had been right about his temper.

Young Ban said, "Hey! Don't get your dander up. And anyway, I kin whip you. I allus have. I'm thirty pounds heavier'n you," he added by way of softening his words.

Joe said, "Whip me? You can talk agin my Pop you'll git no chance to whip me, Ban Snare!"

The bigger boy's eyes darkened, then widened as he saw Joe's hand creep toward the cartridge belt about his slender waist. He said, "My dad always says your father shouldn't allow you to tote no gun, Joe Hatchet. You got that awful temper and—"

There were sounds down the street. The boys whirled as one. There was no doubt as to the tenor of those noises. They were the voices of men in anger, a sound seldom heard in the streets of Hope.

Men came out of the Jingle Bar. Old Ban Snare, big and thick-bodied, was waving his arms and his voice boomed. "Dammit, Hatchet, yer a rebel and yer takin' that money outa Hope. I said it and I'm glad!"

The other ranchers seemed neutral. Ed Hatchet, his sombrero tipped on the back of his head, wore a reckless look that Joe had never seen before. His clear, low voice said, "Be damned to any Yankee tries to tell me what to do."

Ban's fist lashed out. Ed stepped back gracefully, letting the punch go by. Ban came close and Ed struck him twice in the face, knocking him across the boarded walk and clean through the door of the barroom.

Joe yipped, "Git him, Pop. I got his whelp!"

He promptly hit Young Ban on the nose. The amazed, slower-witted youth stumbled backwards, hit his heel and fell. Joe began running awkwardly in his boots toward Ed Hatchet. He yelled, "Keep 'em off, Pop. I'm a-comin'."

Ed turned his head, grinning his slow grin. He said, "Take it easy, Joe. We're pullin' outa here. I don't mean to have no trouble with neighbors. They'll cool off when we're gone. Time we get back, this'll be blowed over."

Joe said, "Then let's git. There is plenty Yanks here."

The sound of the gun was flat, spiteful. It was shocking on the light afternoon air. The piles of stone which were Old Mesa and Young Mesa were darkening and soon there would be no light. But now people could see.

They could see Ed Hatchet's look of infinite surprise. They could see him take a backward step, slow, unsteady. They saw the dark spot form on his new shirt, the one he had bought that day from Pres Moran.

They saw it spread, run through his fingers suddenly scarlet.

They were so occupied in watching, with shocked eyes, while Ed Hatchet died, that they did not see Joe Hatchet. They did not see the white face of the boy as he came, stiff-legged, still running. The first they knew of his presence among them was when he was standing outside the barroom door, his Navy Colt blasting.

They heard Old Ban Snare yell with pain. They saw the boy then and three men reached for him. He shot one through the arm, another in the leg. His white face was a mask in which his eyes burned with a terrible fire. He said nothing, not one word.

He bent over his father for an instant, knowing the truth. Another man took a step toward him, paused, not certain whether the boy had emptied the revolver yet.

Young Ban Snare was up now and also running. Joe turned on him. Old Ban was down in the barroom. It looked for a moment as though Joe was going to finish the job.

Pres Moran yelled from somewhere within, "Git the young varmint afore he kills us all!"

Joe sneered, turned from Young Ban. He walked, still stiff-legged, to the hitching rack. He mounted his horse, turned his father's horse loose. He came back to where his father lay and with inhuman strength lifted the still form and placed it across the new saddle with its silver embossing.

No one stayed him. He mounted and led the horse and its pitiful burden from town, going toward Cross Bar.

When the sheriff came to look for him, the ranch was closed tight. There was a grave beneath the oaks in the back yard. That was all. Hope had seen the last of Joe Hatchet, the boy who worshipped his father.

CHAPTER TWO

Brush-Popper

THERE was one miscalculation in his plans when he left Cross Bar, heartbroken, wanting only to get far away from where his father had died. When young Joe looked into the saddlebag where the bulk of the money had been, it was gone.

There had been a thousand dollars in his father's pockets. But someone in Hope had looted that saddlebag.

Money meant little to fifteen-year-old Joe; that is, it did not mean enough to send him into town with his blazing gun. He merely added the theft to the sum of his hatred for Hope and everything connected with it, and rode north with what was left.

It was years before he realized that there had been forty thousand in the bags and that he had left a fine ranch to the mercy of the county tax collector. Then he realized that he had lost Cross Bar and that he would never own forty thousand dollars again. He was in Texas when he became aware of this. He was twenty-five years old. He had been many things, all of them fairly tough, but honest. He had even been on a boat to China, and found the ocean highly overrated.

He was dealing faro in Fran Hill's place when he began to think of consummating the revenge that had been vaguely stirring him through the years. He had just beaten Del Carruth, the six-feet-six lanky, emaciated gambler and cattle-runner out of his last dollar. He was working on short, dumpy Fats Toole. They were a genial pair of crooks and killers and he had known them for years.

He finished Toole about midnight. He took the boys over and fed them. He said, "A hell of a note. I break you, and Fran Hill gets the money. No sense to it."

"It's your job, podner," said Carruth.

"I need a new one," said Joe Hatchet. He had become a wiry, hard-muscled young man and now his hair lay down nice on his round head and his face was unlined by any dissipation. "My Pop always said a man should never work when he didn't like the job."

Carruth said, "I don't know of any jobs where there is more'n forty a month and found. But I reckon we kin go over the Rio and bring in some wet-backs."

Fats said, "Trouble is, the damn Rangers is out."

"Got t' take a chance sometime," said Carruth. "We're busted."

"There's a town I'd like to see," said Joe Hatchet. "I was raised there. Up in Arizona. Town named Hope."

Carruth said without interest, "I been run outa there. One man town—no, two. Young feller, Ban Snare, owns a big ranch

and the barroom— the big one. Pres Moran is sheriff. They work together. Tough town fer strangers."

"Got a bank," said Fats. "Snare owns it, too. He ain't but about thirty."

"Twenty-five," said Joe. "He's twenty-five."

"Big, beefy fella," said Fats. "Looks thirty."

Joe said, "I got mebee a thousand dineros. How 'bout ridin' up thataway with me?"

Carruth bent his lanky torso forward and fixed Joe with sharp eyes. "You got some caper on your mind?"

"I'll grubstake you to ride up there," Joe repeated.

Fats said, "We could go down below and try them wet-backs and mebbe make a thousand apiece."

"I ain't mäkin' any promises nor threats," said Joe. "If you boys wanta ride, I'll pay the freight. There's things up thataway if Hope don't pan out."

Carruth said, "I like you, Joe. I know your guts. I'm a mind to take you up. This here town of Hope has sure got a fat li'l bank." His eyes hooded and were watchful.

Joe said, "So Ban Snare owns the town, huh?"

"All but what Moran owns," said Carruth. "Moran has got some purty daughter, too. She's gonna marry Snare, they say."

"She's twenty," said Joe. "And blond. Clever sorta gal."

"You know her," said Carruth.

"I can ride tomorrow," said Joe.

Fats said dolefully, "If you two are goin, reckon I'll have to. But them Cross Bar riders are plenty tough. So is Snare. They got deputy sheriffs by the dozen. They really run that country to suit Snare and Moran."

"That's why I don't go alone," said Joe flatly. He did not notice Carruth's elbow digging sharply into the overstuffed body of Toole.

The next day they rode. Presently they came to Old Mesa. It was a fine place to camp, with a stream starting from the promontory and running down into the valley.

Carruth said, "We won't go in at first, case they remember us. Cross Bar is just below us."

"I was raised here, remember?" said Joe. He was remembering too well. All through the years of his wandering there had been a canker in his soul and now he knew what it was. He had been longing for Hope, for the Cross Bar. The memory of his boyhood and his father had been a bitter thing after that day in 1867, and he had thought that he wanted it behind him.

Now he knew he had made a mistake. He had wanted this country, his country, the land rightfully his. And he had neglected it, let it go to the son of the man who had killed his father and whom he had killed, Ban Snare.

Well, he would go down and take some of it back. He made up his mind that first night in camp, under the peaceful stars. He had a stake here. They had robbed and killed his father. Joe Hatchet had something coming to him.

After he had turned in, Carruth and Toole talked at length, away from the fire, but Joe never knew this.

IN THE MORNING he found some berries and stained his face until it was quite dark, using the juice mixed with water from the stream. He donned worn clothing he had brought for the purpose and pulled on a sloppy-brimmed hat which drooped over his face. Even his boots were run over—but he was clean. He wanted to look like a plain cowboy down on his luck.

As an added precaution he left his studded cartridge belt in camp. He shoved his Colt into his waistband, and buttoned his jacket over it.

He had an ordinary good cayuse, a chestnut, and he bade Caruth and Toole so-long and rode down the trail. He remembered every step of the way—it seemed to him that he remembered every blade of grass, every bush and twig. He was almost to the main road to town before he remembered he was on Cross Bar land, his own land.

He paused and stared around. The house was a half mile westward. He wondered if Ban Snare lived in the house, or if he stayed in town with his bank and barroom. Both, he supposed. The summer season was better on the ranch. Ban could afford to live wherever he wanted. The money stolen from Ed Hatchet had given him a fine start in life.

He heard horses then, and reined the

chestnut around, sending him under a cottonwood. He dismounted, stepping lightly, putting the horse behind a clump of brush. The stream which started on Old Mesa burbled past not a dozen yards away.

Two riders came down. They paused at the stream. The horses dipped their noses and drank deeply. A man's heavy voice said, "We'll be married next week, Lucy. I got to go East anyway. It'll be a fine honeymoon."

Joe parted the brush. He stared. He saw the big, wide-shouldered man and knew it was Ban Snare.

The girl was slim. She wore a divided skirt and leggins and moccasins and a man's shirt. Her fair hair hung to her shoulders and her face was still pert, but with a loveliness which stopped Joe's heart. He stood staring, almost forgetting the danger of discovery.

Lucy Moran said, "I cannot marry you next week. Maybe next month, maybe next year, but not next week."

Ban Snare said, "Just because Joe Hatchet rode away ten years ago next week! That's a danged outrage on me, Lucy."

She said, "I sent him away. I told him he had a bad temper and sent him into the street. And then that awful thing happened."

"I tell you my father didn't kill Ed Hatchet," said Ban Snare passionately. "The gun was on the floor, but my father didn't own the gun. Never did find out who owned that gun. My father's gun was in the drawer."

Lucy said, "That's not the point, Ban. I don't want to go over that again. If I hadn't sent Joe out there—I don't know why it made such an impression on me, truly I don't. I was only ten. He had brought me peppermint candy. He was so happy, eager for the big trip with his father."

"He shot my father," said Ban Snare. "He hit me a lucky punch and went down and shot my father."

"And you still have made him a wanted man in Hope," she said sharply. "After ten years, although you know he thought your father murdered Ed Hatchet. Although—"

"You can't talk to me like that, Lucy!" boomed Ban Snare. He reached out a heavy arm. His hand caught at her, spun her.

Joe trembled, restraining himself. Pres Moran was the Sheriff, Snare's partner in running Hope. Lucy was his daughter. These two were engaged—it was none of his business. Ban must have hugged and kissed her many a time before.

Lucy, against the big man's chest, suddenly pronged two fingers and stabbed like lightning at the big man's eyes. Crying out, Ban loosed her. He staggered back. She leaped for her horse, laughing a little at her success, but angry too. She got aboard and the gelding, a beautiful black, spun on a two-bit piece and got off to a flying start.

It was significant that Ban did not take up the chase. He wiped his eyes, sighed. He clambered aboard his big gray stallion. He pointed its nose toward town and left without spurring.

Joe remained in the brush for fifteen minutes, pondering what he had heard. Then he mounted and rode slowly in the direction of Hope.

CHAPTER THREE

To Err is Deadly

THE MAN in the store shoved a box of cartridges across the counter without looking up. He kept his eyes on the money, a typical trick. It was Pres Moran, ten years older, still tending store, but wearing a silver star now.

Joe said, "Any good jobs open around here?"

"Nope," said Moran. "Nothin' fer saddle bums." His faded eyes ran up and down Joe's old clothing.

"Take my money for cartridges, then call me names, eh, Sheriff?" Joe laughed gently. "Okay. I'll move on."

"Got a good jail," said Moran. "Got a gang workin' a new road. Prisoners. Need husky men—no pay, long hours." He sneered. He was skinnier than ever and more than ever unlikely to be Lucy's father.

Joe said, "That'll be the day. So-long, Sheriff." He kept his face averted, going out into the town of Hope. The stain and his mustache would be disguise enough, he hoped. It wasn't much of a mustache, but it was dark and would do.

He went into the Jingle Bar. Crossing the threshold of the saloon from which his father had been killed, he was aware of a deep inner feeling. Somehow he could not

quite be sure of what the emotion meant to him. He eased up to the bar and ordered whiskey.

Young Ban was leaning against the wall. A flat-faced, tough looking bruiser named Phil served the drink.

Two men came in wearing the stars of deputy sheriffs. They went to where Ban was standing and talked in low tones, as though reporting. He nodded and they stood at the bar and drank. One was Ed Horne, the notorious gun-slinger, Joe noted with surprise. He didn't know the other, but heard him called "Ferrell" and guessed he was one of that tough Texan family of killers. Ban Snare really hired him some boys, Joe thought wonderingly. Why have such hard boys in Hope?

Snare was drifting along the bar. Suddenly he was at Joe's side. He said in his heavy voice, "Stranger, you stayin' here long?"

Joe kept his head down and said mildly, "Nope. Sheriff already got me told." He kept a firm grip on himself.

Snare said, "That's mighty good. We don't cotton t' outsiders here. Nothin' personal, o' course."

Joe said, "Your riders reported me here?"

Snare said, "My riders?"

"Nemmine," said Joe. "I'm leavin' pronto."

Snare said, "The deputies of this town work for Mr. Moran, stranger, not for me."

"Mebbe you better hire a man, then," said Joe boldly.

Snare said, "Whatever would I want with a man?"

"You own plenty of the country. You own the bank," said Joe. His heart was beating very fast. "You own this bar. But you say Ed Horne and Tom Ferrell—that is Tom, ain't it?—are workin' for someone else. I'd be plumb scared, Mister Snare."

Ban Snare's voice lowered to an uneasy rumble. "Stranger, you're talkin' somethin' like sense. And bein's you are a stranger, I kin admit it. Funny how it's plumb easier t' talk to strangers, eh?"

Joe said, "I could meet you in the bank, say, in your office. In half an hour. I need a job bad, Mr. Snare. And I'm quick with a gun."

Typically western was the snapped reply, "How quick?"

One of the main advantages to be derived from such conversation, Joe knew, was anticipation. He had set up the question in Ban Snare's mind. He had already foreseen the answer.

At the rear of the bar was a mouse hole. A tiny rodent had been playing in and out of the hole, ignoring the fat cat which dozed in a spot of sunshine streaming in beneath the swinging doors. The mouse popped out, wrinkling its nose in haughty disdain.

Joe's gun came swivelling out of the holster. The mouse, possibly affrighted by the sudden motion in the quiet bar, started back into the hole. It never made it.

Joe's gun spoke once. The smoke curled and the two gun-slingers at the bar leaped eight feet apart and streaked their hands downward. Joe shrugged, covering them and said, "Nothin' to do with you gents. Just a li'l ole field mouse Mr. Snare wanted eliminated. Cat couldn't ketch it. Had t' put a man on the job."

Horne, a bow-legged, scarred man, snarled, "What's a idee, Ban?"

"Nothin', said Ban innocently, a faint smile on his lips. "You coulda killed the mouse, too, Ed. Only you wouldn't hunt a mouse, wouldja?"

Horne said, "Looky here, Ban—"

Snare nodded and took Joe's arm. He said, "In the bank. Come in the back way, there's a private office there."

Joe said, "Thanks, Mr. Snare. I'll be there."

He went out onto Mesa Street and breathed deep of the good air. He was past the first two tests. Neither Moran nor Snare had recognized him.

He was sorry he had brought the boys, now. Carruth and Toole were excess baggage, now that he practically had a job with Ban Snare. He could bore from within the Snare organization, get rid of Horne and Ferrell and their ilk and do about what he chose with the dull-witted Young Ban.

He was almost down to the somewhat weather-beaten but neatly kept house which he remembered so well when the girl came out of the yard and onto the walk. He almost ran into her. He forgot about disguise, forgot to put down his head.

They stood a pace apart, staring into each other's eyes. Lucy Moran said, "Yes. You came back. You're different, but I'd know

you anywhere, believe me, Joe Hatchet!"

He said, "Sorry, ma'am. My name's Lou Price."

She held his eyes. She said softly, "You've come back to make trouble. Oh, I can see it in you, Joe Hatchet! You've dyed your face and grown a mustache. I can see that now, too. You're going to stir up trouble for poor Ban."

"I'm Lou Price, ma'am," said Joe politely. "If you mean Mr. Ban Snare, I'm goin' to work for him."

She said, uncertainty finding her for the first time, "But you can't do that. I mean —that's treacherous."

Joe rolled the brim of the broken hat. His hair was flat to his head. He saw her seeking the cowlick which he had mastered during the ten years of his absence. Again she was shocked to indecision.

She said, "I could have sworn—I don't see how I could have been mistaken. Oh, you *are* Joe Hatchet. I know it. I *know* it."

He gulped very deep in his throat, almost choking, but he could not waver now. The whole thing depended upon keeping himself anonymous. He said, "Ma'am, I'd be proud to acknowledge you were a lady I once knew. But I'm Lou Price outa El Paso."

She drew herself up and said stiffly, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Price. I seem to have made an awkward error."

"To err is human," quoted Joe piously. "Ma'am, please think nothing of it."

"Good day, Mr. Price," she said, and swept away. She went into the bank, but she did not stay very long. She came out and went across to her father's store and remained there while Joe stalled waiting to meet Ban Snare in the bank.

AROUND the back of the building ran a high fence. That was the silliest thing a banker could do, allow a fence around his property. Men could work behind a fence like that unnoticed by the townsfolk.

The back door was nothing to worry about, should a determined crew want to rob the bank. It could be forced in a moment. Joe went through it and found himself in a spacious, light, airy room with a desk, several chairs and a huge, built-in safe. Ban Snare was waiting, cigar in the corner of his mouth.

It was a perfect set-up. Joe wondered what would happen if he took out his gun right now, announced his identity, made Ban open the safe and took the forty thousand due him. Could he get away to Mesa and fight his way out of the country?

He put the thought aside, knowing that banks did not always carry forty thousand in cash in the safe. He told Ban Snare he was Lou Price and accepted a cigar.

Snare stared at him and said casually, "You favor a lad useta live here. Name of Joe Hatchet. Ever hear of him down Texas?"

"Nope," lied Joe. "Sorry fer him if he looked like me."

"He was a good ole varmint," mused Snare. "Him an' me was raised together. Had a fierce temper. My dad always called him 'that li'l rebel varmint'."

Joe said, "About this situation here, Mr. Snare, those deputies ride the hills and the grazing grounds, don't they? And make reports to Moran—and mebbe to you."

"Yeah," said Snare. "This here Joe Hatchet, he was my bud. Wiry li'l terrier. He could shoot like a fiend."

A slight chill entered Joe's veins. Lucy Moran had come into the bank. Had she talked to Ban Snare about him?

If she was his girl she would tell him, of course. Joe cursed himself for a mangy fool not remembering she was Ban's girl, and that they were to be married. Of course she would warn him about Lou Price! Probably Ed Horne and Tom Ferrell were lurking outside, and now the fence would be useful indeed to cover their attack. Lou Price would be just another saddle-bum who had drifted into trouble with the hard-shooting deputies.

Joe said, "Uh-huh." He took out the makings and rolled one. He had long ago learned to control his hands. He went on, "I know Ed Horne and he's all right. But he works for one man. If you hired him, okay. But what about reportin' to the sheriff? That gives him two bosses. His pay comes from the county—Horne is the kind who respects the paymaster."

Ban Snare said, "I pay 'em plenty, too. Terrible thing happened to this here Joe Hatchet. His father got in a little barroom argument and got shot over it. Joe seen it. Joe runs down and shoots my father." He paused, drawing on the cigar. He said,

"Hurt the old man, too. Bothered him 'til the day he died."

Joe said, "Yeah?—Huh?" His face was a blazing question-mark.

Ban Snare flicked ashes into a brass cuspidor. "Got the old man in the chest, but he was tough. Just died last year. Only bad thing, Joe's father died. Joe never did know what become of about forty thousand dollars Ed Hatchet had in his saddlebag that day. Terrible thing. . . ."

Joe said, "Uh. Yeah. Sounds like it. . . ." He made his voice steady and calm. "Now what I figger, Mr. Snare, you need a confidential agent, sorta inside o' things. I can do anything on a ranch, Mr. Snare. I can ride and I can shoot, like you saw. And I'll work for a hundred a month."

Ban Snare said, "I sure would like to see that Joe Hatchet. He's done caused me plenty of grief. I'd sure like to get my hands on him. But he was a good bud when we were buttons."

Joe said desperately, "Why, I'll bet I can tell you somethin' right now your riders ain't reported."

Snare said, "Huh? Oh. You kin? Spill it."

"There's two outlaws layin' up at Old Mesa," said Joe. "They're plottin' a caper down here, sure as you're a foot high. I come on them this morning. I saw your men goin' over the skyline, so I know they musta cut track. Did they report it?"

He had a feeling this would not hold water. He was lying too fast. But he had to get in with Snare, get established to keep Moran and the deputies from cutting down on him and running him off. Or killing him.

Snare said slowly, "No, they didn't report that—to me."

Joe said, "If you got any hard cash in the bank you better set a guard. That fence lets them work in the back pretty easy. Don't keep any money in here." He gestured toward the big safe. "It's too easy to work unnoticed in here. Put it out in front and leave on the light."

Snare said, "You're purty smart, at that. You had police experience?"

"Yes," said Joe shortly. "Plenty."

Snare nodded. He said, "Okay. I can fix that. We need a City Marshal." He reached into a drawer and drew out a gold badge. He tossed it on the desk and said, "You're it. Hundred a month. Eat at the hotel. Eat good. The town pays for it."

"How about the Mayor—the alderman or whatever?" Joe gasped.

"I'm Mayor," said Ban Snare carelessly. "They leave them things t' me hereabouts. You want the job, you report t' me. You watch the bank, keep order in the bar. 'Course you watch the rest of town, too. We can use you, Price."

Again Joe wondered if the gun-slinger deputy sheriffs were outside, if this was all a joke. He picked up the badge and said, "I hadn't reckoned on this, but I'll take it."

"Good," said Ban Snare. He squinted his eyes and said, "Like t' see yuh without the mustache. Ye sure favor the kid, Joe Hatchet."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Open up Them Pearly Vaults!"

IT WAS noon before he could be sure he was not followed. He had been present when Ben Snare announced, in his bar, that Joe was the new Marshal. He'd seen Pres Moran's face twist into anger and perhaps fear. He had noted the drawing together of the two gunmen, had seen them drift out after Moran had left, undoubtedly for a conference.

This morning he had ridden all over Cross Bar. Various riders had been suspicious, and had tried to get up with him. He had avoided them with ease. His memory was that of a boy who had known every Indian trick and had used them all in this well-beloved country, playing the games of boyhood.

He climbed Old Mesa now, the chestnut a bit weary. He came to the camp site of the night before last.

It was gone. Carruth and Fats Toole were gone.

Thoughtfully, Joe rode back to Hope. He put the chestnut in the stable behind the hotel and washed up. It was not until he dried himself that he realized with a start that he had stained his face with berry juice.

It was too late now to do anything about it. He wiped off the rest of the juice and went out past the stable. He selected a sunny spot and bravely turned his face up to it. He needed some tan, and he needed it fast. He let the sun cascade over his

nose, cheekbones and lower jaws. He covered his forehead with the worn brim of his hat and slept.

He awoke with a start. Lucy Moran was seated on an upturned box, ten feet away from him. Over her shoulder was a parasol. He looked past Lucy and there was a fringe of trees at the back end of the pleasant hotel property.

Among the trees were two men. One was very tall and thin, the other short and fat. They made motions unmistakable to Joe.

Lucy Moran said, "I've been waiting for you to wake up. I covered your mustache with my finger like so, Joe Hatchet, and you simply can't fool me any more."

He said confusedly, "Why—how come you didn't tell Ban, yesterday? You were pretty sure then."

"I'm going to tell him now," she said, but her cheeks flushed. "Lou Price! Getting in with Ban so he'd give you a job! What are you planning, Joe Hatchet? Oh, must you always be killing someone?"

"Why, Lucy, I never killed anyone in my life," he objected. "Not even Old Ban, I find. I've disabled a few people, sure. Had to, to stay alive. But I never killed anyone."

"You tried. You tried to kill Old Ban and he never even shot your Pop," she said.

"Who did, then?" Joe demanded. "Who stole forty thousand dollars from his saddlebags?"

"Nobody knows. Some drifter, maybe," she said.

"There were no drifters in Hope," said Joe. "Not those days."

She said, "I don't know, but I know you shouldn't come in here and make trouble for Ban. He never did anything to you."

"He's got Cross Bar," said Joe, but there was no fire in him. He said quickly, "I shouldn't of said that. I let the taxes go. It was my own fault. I never came back here."

"Why not, Joe? Why didn't you come back?" Her blue eyes had a trick of widening and staring at him, making him powerless.

He said, "I thought I didn't want to. I thought I hated it, on account of what happened."

"But now, Joe? Now you've come back?"

He saw Carruth wave an arm. It was a peremptory gesture. Joe said, "I got to think some more about it. I told Ban I am Lou Price. Lucy, I'll see you later and talk to you. I got to go now."

"That silly juice on your face," she sniffed. "Like we used to play Indian with. And that mustache, like a Mexican!"

He said, "All right, Lucy, I'll shave it off."

"I'm sure I don't care a hoot what you do to your silly face," she said, holding her shoulders very high and stiff. "I'm going to marry Ban Snare."

"But not next week," said Joe boldly. "Because that's a kind of anniversary. I ran away ten years ago next week."

She stared at him and her eyes were not piercing him now. They were warmly regarding him and the smile at the corners of her lips were tender and sweet. She said, "I declare, that's exactly the way I thought about it. Joe, you're a caution, really you are."

He would have taken her hand, he would have been compelled to. But over in the trees his erstwhile companions of the trail were making even more imperious gestures. He contented himself with answering her smile as broadly as he could and taking her elbow, walking her toward the hotel. Behind his back he made reassuring motions with his left hand. He hoped Carruth and Fats would understand that he was returning and would not sight their rifles between his shoulder blades.

He said, "Please, Lucy, don't tell anyone now. Lemme work this out, huh?"

"I'm not a tell-tale," she said proudly. "I didn't tell yesterday. And I won't today."

"You're plumb sweet," he said. He watched her walk to the veranda of the hotel. Her hips swung free, she walked like a woman, naturally and without mincing. It made him happy to watch her walk.

He admonished himself that she was going to marry Ban Snare. He went to the back of the barn and slipped over into the trees at the edge of the lot.

CARRUTH said severely, "Desertin' yer pals, huh? Comin' to town and playin' with gals."

Joe said, "Don't be a dumb fool."

"That bank," said Fats happily. "That fence! How much has he got in there,

Joe? Must be a real load of cash."

Carruth said, "It's a smart caper, Joe. You're the Marshal. We move in tonight, clean it out. You stick around awhile, so no one will suspicion you. Then we meet in Mexico City." The lean man rubbed his hands together. They made a sound like dry leaves rustling in autumn.

Joe said, "No. We don't do that."

Carruth said, "Now wait, Joe. You brought us up here—"

Joe said, "With no guarantees, remember?"

"It was understood," said Fats Toole with dignity. "If the bank was a shove-in, like this one—"

Joe said, "I'm telling you, don't try it. Ed Horne and Tom Ferrell are working this country too, as deputies."

Carruth said, "Yeah. I seen those boys this mornin', early. Seen 'em snoopin' yesterday, too, but didn't talk to 'em until this mornin'. Don't worry about them, Joe. They see the light. We kin have the bank."

Joe said slowly, "Uh-huh. I see. Them boys are gettin' ready for somethin', huh? But why let us have the bank?"

Carruth's thin face split in a grin. "Little hangin' matter not far from here. Has to do with Horne."

"Them boys work for Snare and Moran," said Joe. "Guess they got no morals atall, huh?"

Carruth laughed. "You're some character, Joe. We'll go in against the bank about midnight, see? You just keep outa the way. We'll see you in Mexico City a month from now."

"I know you will," said Joe earnestly. He knew very well they wouldn't. He could see them heading East on a rattler right now. He said, "However, count me out, friends."

Carruth's skinny elbow reached stealthily for the ribs of Fats Toole. The tall man said, "Well, Joe, if that's the way yuh feel about it."

Fats nodded lugubriously, "Easiest li'l ole bank I ever see. It'd push in like slappin' a mosquito dead. But we can't buck you, Joe. Not in yer home town."

They turned away, going to their cayuses. Joe watched them. He had no doubt whatsoever that they were going merely far enough to make plans. It suddenly occurred to him that they could plan a lot better if he were to be dead among these oaks.

He moved into line with a thick tree trunk and began a masterly retreat. Each time he thought he saw a man's figure he changed his route and lifted his Colt, ready to make a fight. Pretty soon he was out of pistol range, which made him very nervous as both Carruth and Toole had rifles. He broke into a run and just as he made the corner of the barn a rifle spat.

The bullet took splinters from the barn. Joe dived inside and narrowly missed having his brains kicked out by his own restless chestnut. He rolled out the front of the barn and into the hotel.

He took his saddlebags up into his room and changed clothing. He had some nice dark trousers and a black coat and a white shirt. He hesitated in front of the mirror, razor in hand, but he was still Lou Price to everyone but Lucy Moran and dared not shave off the mustache.

He went down into the dining room and every head turned. He wore the badge under the lapel of the coat, but people knew it was there. They were frankly curious about the new Town Marshal.

At a large table sat Lucy Moran, Ban Snare and Pres Moran. Joe was about to go by, to a small table in the corner, when Ban Snare motioned to him to join them. He stood through an introduction to Lucy. His face flushed even darker.

Pres Moran said in his cracked, harsh voice, "So you made good with a revolver shot, huh, stranger?"

Ban Snare said good-naturedly, "Now, Pres, leave the man alone. He tipped me off to some smart things."

Moran said, "Like what?"

"Oh, like your deputies ain't exactly little saints," grinned Ban Snare. "They report to you, but they don't bother to tell me there's strangers on Old Mesa."

Pres Moran's face turned pink. He muttered, "Waal, guess they didn't think. I knew it. Couple men, campin'. They lit a shuck."

Joe breathed again. His bluff had proved to be no bluff at all. As Carruth had said, Horne and Ferrell talked with Joe's ex-partners, had seen them the day before, had reported to Pres Moran but not to Ban Snare.

But why? Joe wondered. If Lucy was

going to marry Ban, why was Moran playing a game of his own?

Moran said suddenly, "Yuh know, young feller, you certainly favor a young lad useta live here—a reg'lar li'l varmint. Name of Joe Hatchet. You ever hear of him of late years?"

Joe glanced at Ban Snare. He said lightly, "I must be a sorta double fer this feller. Mr. Snare said the same."

"Yep, you're right, Pres," said Ban, lighting a cigar. "He sure does favor ole Joe. Sure would like to get my hands on Joe."

"Me too," said Moran fervently. "I'd give a heap to get hold of Joe Hatchet."

Lucy's cheeks were burning, but she looked away from Joe and at the door. Horne and Ferrell walked from the hotel bar through the lobby and out onto Mesa Street. Joe followed them with his eyes, wondering how far the thing would go.

Ban Snare said, "I got some puzzlin' book work at the bank. I'll leave yawl to git acquainted." He waved the cigar, going out. Everyone was eager to speak with him, to get his attention. He was the big man in the town, for all his youth.

He watched Moran for signs of jealousy. The lean, stooped ex-New Englander was not even watching Snare. He was playing with a fork, making invisible patterns on the table. He said in his dry voice, "You don't think much of Horne and Ferrell?"

"I didn't say that," Joe spoke carefully. Lucy's regard was warm upon him.

Lucy said, "Father, I told you I never liked those men. They are known killers."

"They keep out other killers who don't owe us loyalty," said Pres Moran grimly.

Joe said, "I know what you mean. But Horne and Ferrell are pretty smart hombres. Wages never satisfy them and you got no big gambling here. I was just speculatin', Mr. Moran."

"I know. You come lookin' to work them out," said Moran with calm irony. "Dog eat dog. I understand. You're a gunman, too."

"Not a real gunman," Joe said, grinning. "I never killed a man I find out."

Pres Moran was staring at him. The old storekeeper looked at Lucy, then back at Joe. He said excitedly, "That grin! Why, you varmint, I'd know that anywhere! Lucy—don't lie to me." His face was twisted. "Don't lie to me, daughter! That's li'l Joe Hatchet! It's true, daughter. It's Joe!"

It was eight o'clock. The clock struck. Several people in the hotel diningroom were staring curiously at the large, round table where the trio sat.

From down the street came a shot. There were horses moving fast, then another shot. Then a voice roared, "Keep inside, everybody. You won't be hurt. We only want the bank!"

That was the voice of Del Carruth. He had worked out a fast plan, struck before Joe could imagine he would act.

Joe said, "Excuse me, please." He went out the back door of the hotel. He was drawing his gun as he went. He had cartridges loose in his pocket, where he could finger them in when he needed them. He heard Pres Moran shout something, but he didn't pause to find out what it was. He just headed for the fence at the rear of the bank.

CHAPTER FIVE

Account Closed

IT WAS pitch dark in the back. He saw the men dimly, crashing the door with a battering ram, a log they must have found somewhere. There were two of them.

But Carruth had been in the street. He had been on a horse, face masked, his rifle tucked under his arm, sweeping the street with his fire. There were others in the street.

So that was the way it was. Carruth and Horne had thrown in together. It was not surprising, because they were of the same school, Joe knew. They were the wild ones, who took this job and that, always looking for quick big money.

Just like Joe Hatchet had been, he amended. He had not missed being one of them by much. In fact, he might be with them right now if Ban Snare had not soliloquized yesterday in the back office of the bank.

He cut across a lot, coming to the outside of the fence. It afforded good protection for the robbers, but it held an advantage for the other side, too. They could not see Joe approaching.

It was a pretty high fence. He could not

reach the top. He went down to the side of the bank and looked around. He was pretty calm now. He had been awfully mad for a moment, but now he had himself under control and his mind was working pretty good. He figured they would have to stash their horses somewhere nearby. He found two of them at the end of the fence, saw two more at the other end.

He scowled. That made six men—Fats and Del, Horne and Ferrell, and the riders of the other two nags.

He had counted only upon four. He unhitched the nearest horse and got into the saddle. He rode him along the fence until he was opposite the back door, the one leading to Ban's office.

He stood up in the saddle. The strange horse bucked. Joe kicked loose and held onto the fence. His gun was in his waistband and he balanced there, clutching the boards, realizing that he was skylined for fair to anyone within the bank. Out front there were occasional shots, but the town, taken by complete surprise, was not putting up any kind of battle.

Inside the back office of the bank they had taken Ban Snare. He was standing up, head back, blood on his face. Ed Horne had a knife in his hand and was suggesting that Ban open the safe.

Ban said, "You better go ahead with your Apache tricks, Ed."

There was a half-breed in there with Ed, and Tom Ferrell was trying to open the safe by twirling the combination. The breed must be one of the gang Horne had been building, Joe thought.

Ferrell said, "Bend the gun over his head and let him lay. We kin blow this thing. I got some dynamite. I jest hated t' take the time. Where's that damn Hatchet?"

"The hell with him," said Horne. "We ain't got time to blow up your safe, Ban. You better give us them numbers." He held the knife low, aiming it suggestively at Ban's groin. It takes a strong man to stand up under an insinuation of that sort, Joe knew. He dropped into the alley, trying to make no noise.

He was aware of the outside man at the same time the outside man was aware of him. Joe landed almost on the head of this big man called "Hat."

Hat immediately opened his mouth to yell. Joe promptly shoved the muzzle of his pistol into Hat's mouth. At the same moment he raised his knee and kicked Hat where Horne was threatening to stab Ban Snare.

Hat gurgled but could not yell. Joe crashed a left hook home on his jaw. Hat almost swallowed Joe's gun. Joe drew it back and hit Hat hard behind the ear. He hated to do it, but he could take no chances on Hat's immediate recovery.

He moved to the door. He saw Horne's face, saw the bitter determination in his eyes as he advanced upon the burly, sweating Ban Snare. He snapped, "Move, Ban! I got 'em."

He had forgotten that Ban was not too bright. The big man was slow getting out of the line of fire. There was a moment when Joe could have taken a chance—and possibly would have killed Ban. But he surely would have got Ed Horne with the first bullet, even if it went through Ban's head.

Instead, he ducked sideways and let Ban move to the window. He saw Ban fumbling for something in a closet beside the window, and swung his gun. Tom Ferrell was shooting from the hip. The knife flew through the air. It slithered past Joe's ear and stuck into the desk. Ferrell missed his first two shots, a miracle. But then, Ferrell was thinking of the money in the safe.

Ban shouted, "Get Horne, Joe."

He was bringing up a short shotgun. He threw it down on Ferrell. Joe, tumbling backwards, saw the breed fire a revolver. Ban stumbled and the shotgun charge went into the ceiling. The breed had Ban cold in his sights, but Joe opened up with his first shot.

He got the breed square in the chest, knocking him aside, into the line of Ferrell's fire. Ferrell hit the breed with his next shot. Ferrell was having a bad time.

Horne was maneuvering for a clean shot. Like Joe, he was not a man to waste lead. He was trying to line up Joe and end it quick. Ban was scrambling on the floor, bleeding a lot and cursing frightfully. Outside there was sudden, organized shooting. The townsfolk had come alive. Fats and Del couldn't hold them alone, that was for sure.

The time element was the factor which would decide the issue, Joe knew. If he could hold these gun-slingers long enough

to let the townspeople chivvy the outside men from town, Horne and Ferrell would be picked off as they emerged with their loot. Of course Joe—and Ban—would be dead. But the bank would be saved.

He was trying to get onto Ferrell and keep Horne from getting him. It was quite a task. There was good light from the lamp, and Joe left it, not wishing to hit Ban by error. His safety depended upon his skill in ducking and changing position, and upon his sleight-of-hand shooting.

He saw Horne level the revolver and knew he had to take a chance. He feinted going left, then leaped suddenly to the right.

Horne, a sardonic grin on his face, anticipated the move. Ferrell, still in bad luck, was wrong and shot where Joe had just been. But Horne's gun followed, menacing, chilling.

Still, the rule was take the closest man. Joe ducked back as Ferrell threw an empty gun at his head. He drew another. It was dog eat dog and Joe shot at Ferrell, at the same time throwing himself full length on the floor of the bank office.

Ferrell buckled in the middle. His brow hit the boards first. It made a hollow sound in the room. Then Horne fired twice.

The bullets were spaced. The first missed Joe as he went to the floor. The second, deflected downward, hit him. It seared his shoulder and pinned him to the floor.

He missed his shot at Horne. He was as good as dead right then and he knew it, staring up into the reptilian eyes of the gunslinger. He tried hard to move, but the shot from Horne's gun had paralyzed him. He couldn't move a muscle. He knew it was just a momentary shock; he knew if he had time he would be all right. It seemed a hell of a way to die. Horne was thumbing the hammer.

There was another sound, a flat, louder sound. It was a rifle shot. It came from within the room.

JOE MADE a last effort, moved his head. He saw Pres Moran, gray hair standing on hand, bearing a Winchester rifle. He saw the finger of the townsman who never shot a gun twitch on the trigger.

He heard a thud. He managed with great effort to turn again, the other way. Ed Horne lay on the floor, blood oozing from his left breast. He lifted the revolver with his dying effort.

Joe gasped, "Look out, Moran!"

But the storekeeper was no gun fighter. Leaning forward, fascinated, he presented a target not to be missed.

Ed Horne, dying, shot Pres Moran through the chest.

Joe got back his strength. He clutched the edge of Ban Snare's desk. He heard an eeyowing shriek on the night and then the clatter of hoofs. That finished the raid on the Hope bank. The shots outside ceased. Carruth and Fats Toole had gotten away.

No one inside had gotten clear, Joe thought grimly. There was blood running down his own back. He picked up Ban Snare's arm, saw that the big man was alive. A small, fat man came bustling in. He had a black bag, but he was new to Joe.

Joe said, "Mr. Moran is bad hit."

The doctor bent over the storekeeper. In a moment he had come away and was kneeling beside Ban Snare. Lucy Moran walked in, her knees shaking, her eyes wet with tears, staring about as though ready to faint at what she would see. In a moment she was on the floor, holding her father's head in her lap.

Pres Moran's voice was clear. He said, "You've got to find Jot Hatchet, Lucy, like I've always told ye. In the safe—that box. It's on my conscience, Lucy. I never used it, but I never returned it. I was tempted, Lucy, and I fell."

She said, "Hush, father." Her wet eyes pleaded with Joe.

Joe said, "Mr. Moran, I'm Joe. Remember?"

The fading eyes turned to him. Pres Moran said, "Ah? You're Joe? Yes, I mind ye looked like him. You do. It's about yer father, son. Ten years ago. Old Ban never shot him. Nobody shot him. We were scared of him. He hit old Ban and I ran for a gun we had. I knew nothin' of guns, son. This had a hairline action, and I dropped it."

Joe said, "Pop was killed by accident?"

"But the money," said Pres Moran in low accents. "It was in the saddlebag. I took it out when he was drinking, for safe keepin', son. Then I was tempted."

"Father!" cried Lucy.

"Oh, I never used it. I kept lookin' for

(Continued on page 95)

FORTUNE'S FAIR-HAIRED FEW

IN JANUARY, 1848 Jim Marshall found gold on Captain Sutter's ranch near Coloma, California. For the next twenty years hordes of lusty young Americans and a sprinkling of adventurers from every part of the world swarmed over California, Colorado and the Northwest, seeking hidden wealth in creek beds and mountains. Although success most often resulted from sound judgment, hard work, a strong physique and good health, there are instances where sheer luck paid dividends. Some such are as follows:

●

A drunken sailor named Clarke lost his path one moonless night and tumbled into a ravine. He tried frantically to climb out but finally gave up and spent the night on a bed of dried leaves at the bottom of the cut. In the early morning light, Clarke found a way out. As he climbed the bank he noted a touch of yellow in the roots of a bush displaced by his struggles the night before. Returning with pick and shovel, he located a claim that produced $70,000 in a few days. That was the start of the famous California camp, Steep Gulch. Ten years later in the same spot someone turned up a twenty-eight pound nugget that Clarke and his fellow miners had overlooked.

●

A practical joker at Cedar Ravine in the California fields advised two newcomers to try their luck at Piety Point nearby, a location abandoned by experienced miners in favor of more productive diggings on the creek level. The gullable strangers went to work and soon brought a load of dirt to the creek for washing. The joker stood nearby to witness their discomfiture but the joke was on him when his experienced eye spotted coarse gold in the pan. The greenhorns became undisputed owners of the richest claim in camp.

●

A Placerville miner whose claim had petered out sold it to three emigrants for $150. Not knowing that the former owner had exhausted the pay streak, the beginners dug deeper in the worked-out excavations. Two feet down they struck rich sand and gravel that bore gold.

In the early 1850's George McKnight (or Knight—the records do not agree) left his work in Grass Valley, California, to locate a stray cow. In Boston Ravine, he stubbed his toe on some rubble hidden by the deep grass and turned up a fragment of quartz showing color. Back in camp he pounded the rock to powder and washed out a small quantity of yellow metal. Such was the beginning of quartz mining which eventually made more wealth than placer mining ever did.

●

Two miners quarreled over division of a space of land between their claims. Fearing the biased judgment of friends and local miners, they called in a stranger. The referee studied the situation and made a plan; he paced off ten-foot sections adjoining the two claims and added that much land to each. This left a five-foot strip between them, which, the stranger said, should go to him as a fee and to serve as a buffer keeping the enemies apart. The embattled miners agreed and a week or two later the umpire located a pocket of gold nuggets that enriched him by $8,000.

●

In 1877 an old miner prospecting near Rosita, Colorado, became discouraged and decided to try elsewhere. Before leaving, he seated himself on a log to rest and smoke while, with one hand, he pecked away at some rock at his feet with one point of his pick. Chipping off a sliver of quartz, he saw it was flecked with gold. The ledge and the vein accidently discovered ran hundreds of feet underground. A mill was built that pounded out $400,000 in three years. After that the miner retired, selling his share for a million in cash and stock.

●

A gold seeker near Leadville, Colorado in 1878 had similar bad luck, failing to find a trace of color for weeks. Turning hunter to replenish his larder, he killed a deer, so the story goes, and the animal, in its dying struggles dug a hole in the turf with his heels. As the miner skinned the deer, he became interested in what he saw in the earth underfoot. Seeking a stream, he washed the first pan from an extremely rich claim.—By Warner Bates

Hero's a Word on a Tombstone!

By BARRY CORD

A grim barrier of seventy long miles stretched between Jeff Carter and the security he'd find across the Border. . . . But even before he tackled that desert pasear, he'd have to take in hand a cold-blooded killer, a warm-hearted girl, a scared kid, and a totally unwelcome vein of heroism in himself!

HE RAN his hand down the black's neck, feeling the sweat damp and cool against his palm. *Seventy miles more to the Border,* he thought. *Then we can take it easy.*

The animal shifted restlessly in his stall and Jeff squatted to take another look at the stone bruise on the black's left forefoot. The hostler, standing behind him, shifted the lantern for better light and Jeff said: "Put some more salve around that cut tonight, before you leave. An' rub it down with liniment. I don't want that leg stiff in the mornin'."

He straightened up and stepped back

and the hostler dropped the pivot bar in its slot.

"Stayin' in town long, stranger?" the stableman asked. He wanted to make conversation. A lot of men, at one time or another, passed through the town of Bishop and stabled their mounts here. He was curious about them all, being a nosy sort of human, and he was particularly curious concerning this lean, tow-headed man with the quiet smile who had just come in. He watched Jeff move away, noting the bulge of a holstered gun against his dusty coat, the slight limp as he walked. "Stayin' long?" he repeated.

Jeff paused in the side doorway and watched his shadow in the narrow alleyway. "I'll be leavin' in the morning. Mebbe before sun-up."

The hostler came toward him, swinging the lantern and Jeff's long shadow danced in the alley. "You'll find the side door open," he said. "Case I ain't up." He hesitated. "That'll be a dollar for feed, a dollar for the stall an' four bits for salve an' rubdown."

Jeff reached inside his pants pocket and pulled out the remains of two hundred dollars. Three silver dollars and a five dollar goldpiece.

He dropped the silver coins in the hostler's fat palm. "Buy yoreself a drink," he said. He turned, fishing in his vest pocket for the makings. He rolled the smoke without thinking and he had it in his mouth before he was conscious of the gesture.

He was out of matches. The fat stableman raised his lantern and Jeff bent over the chimney. The heat flushed his face before he got the cigaret going. He nodded his thanks and stepped out into the alley.

He was dog tired. He had been pushing himself and the black for a week, taking the back trails, the rough stretches, the long, lonely road to the Mexican border. All because he had fought on the wrong side in the recent Brad County cattle war. Because he had killed two men while riding for the Pitchfork brand. Two hardbitten gunnies on the Seven-Y-Two payroll. A political shift had put the Seven-Y-Two on the side of law and order and made outlaws of the Pitchfork men.

The feeling against Jeff was the more bitter because one of the men he had killed was the sheriff's brother. All the way down from Brad County the posters had preceded him.

WANTED
Jeff Carter—alive or dead
$2,000 reward

Maybe we'll get a breather here, he thought. *A chance for a square meal an' a few hours sleep in a bed.*

He had been in Bishop before. Three years ago, he remembered. He had passed through with a trail herd, on the way up to the Indian Reservation at Taos. They had been held up three days by the swollen river north of town. Sure, this was where he had met a girl. Muriel Enders. Always thought he'd ride back and see her again.

He stopped five paces from the alley mouth, drawing back sharply against the dark building wall. A man was crossing the alley mouth—a short, heavy-set man with a star winking on his coat.

A girl's voice hailed him. "Buck! Wait —please!"

The lawman stopped, turning his back to Jeff.

Narrow heels tapped quickly on the boardwalk, then a girl came into the alley mouth, outlined against the light from buildings across the street. She was short and slim and Jeff saw her profile as she came up to the waiting man—a short, pert nose and a determined chin line.

"The Callahans are in town," the girl said. There was fear in her voice, held back, straining inside her. "They just rode by Ma Sylvester's."

The man nodded. "I know," he said. "I tried to find Steve. Buck, I've got to find him. They'll kill him. That's why they came to town."

The lawman put a hand on her shoulder. "Go on back to the hotel," he said. "I'll find Steve. There won't be any trouble."

"They came looking for it," the girl cried. "Lee was carrying a shotgun—"

"Let me handle it," Buck cut in dryly. "I'll talk to Red Callahan. There won't be any trouble. Now go on back to yore room."

The girl hesitated. He turned away, his steps heavy on the boardwalk. Jeff could see the indecision in the girl's slim figure. Finally she straightened and started after the lawman.

Three years. It was a long time in his

life, Jeff reflected—but not long enough for him to forget that profile. He felt his cigaret scorch his fingers and he ground it out under his runover heel. It was July and a warm wind pushed through the alley, bringing the smell of garlic from someone's kitchen mingling it with the sharp odor of manure.

Wonder who Steve is? The urgency of the moment pushed the reflection aside. It did not concern him. He had come back to Bishop, but not the way he had intended, the night he'd said good bye to Muriel. He had, in fact, forgotten her until this moment.

HE STEPPED out of the alley and was turning right when he bumped into her.

He said: "Sorry, ma'am—"

His face was in partial shadow, but hers was illuminated from a wide square of light from across the street. A pretty face, he thought—round and soft, moulded nicely around a pert nose and a full, wide mouth.

She looked up at him, her mind still obsessed by her fear. "I should have looked where I was going." She moved on, her shoulders slumped. Then she stopped, as if her remembrance of him had just registered. She came back to him, her voice sharp with surprise. "Jeff! Jeff Carter!"

He waited. Somewhere out on the flats a train whistled its lonely warning. He felt the echo of that loneliness strike deep inside him as she came up to him, as he saw her face and the smile in her eyes. This was what he had missed those three years, although he hadn't realized how much until this moment.

"Jeff," she said, holding out her hand. "When did you ride in?"

"Just got in," he answered, taking her hand. She had long cool fingers and her clasp was firm.

She nodded, edging closer to the building wall as a man and woman came by. The woman gave her a quick, sharp look and after they had passed, her shocked whisper came back to them: "Married less than six months and already holding hands with another man!"

The eagerness this meeting had whipped up in Jeff dropped through a sudden hole in his stomach. He stood holding her hand, thinking that this was the way things had been with him through three years. Always a little too late.

The engine whistled again, sharply, and he dropped her hand.

"You staying in town long?" she asked.

"Until mornin'."

She hesitated, and he felt the lag of the moment. Her first flash of welcome was fading under the press of an insistent fear. She had been a gay, laughing girl when he first met her, inclined to be flirtatious, ready with repartee. She was quiet now, her vivaciousness subdued. She scarcely remembered him.

"Good night, Jeff," she said, and he touched his hat as she turned away. He looked after her. The train rattled past the station of this whistle-stop town, its whistle long and wailing and fading into the night.

Bishop was a quiet town. Looking west along Main Street Jeff saw the dark loom of the San Andres, a wall against the sky. Behind him the town petered out to the darkening flatlands.

Jeff kept to the shadows, his limp barely noticeable. His belt was loose against his empty stomach. He had to reach down and give his gunbelt a hitch to keep it from sliding down past his narrow hips.

The unmistakable odor of steak frying in butter turned him into the first lunchroom he came to. JOE PAYETTE'S LUNCH was painted in black across window.

Three men occupied counter stools, and an oldish couple were doing more talking than eating at a rear table.

Joe Payette, a short, baldheaded man in a greasy apron, was leaning on the counter, talking to a young man on the stool nearest Jeff. He glanced up as Jeff came across the room. No one else looked around. Jeff slid his leg over the seat and eyed the penciled menu tacked on the wall behind the counter.

Joe Payette moved reluctantly toward Jeff, scowling at the interruption of his conversation. "What's yores, stranger?"

"Steak an' potatoes. Side dish of that apple pie. An' coffee."

Payette turned and yelled his order through the kitchen slot, turning his back on Jeff. The man he had been talking to got up off his stool, brushing back his unbuttoned coat to get at change in his vest

pocket. A deputy's star glinted briefly and Jeff stiffened, silently cursing his luck. Of the several places in Bishop where he might have eaten, he had to pick out one with a deputy.

The man tossed a half dollar on the counter and Payette took it, shaking his head. "Just the same, Steve," he said, evidently continuing his conversation, "I'd walk clear of alleys for a while. Lee Callahan ain't the kind to take a gun-whippin' like you gave him."

The deputy shrugged. "He had it comin', Joe." He turned away, his eyes sliding curiously over Jeff.

Steve, Jeff was thinking. This was the man Muriel had married. A slim man, blond, carefully dressed. A lean face, high cheek bones, grave blue eyes. A conscientious man, Jeff judged grimly—a man not likely to back down from what he considered duty. He felt this in the measure of the other's narrowing glance and a quick-passing regret went through Jeff.

The deputy paused. "Where you from, stranger?"

Jeff swung around on his stool. The two men behind the lawman glanced around, their attention caught by the deputy's tone. Joe Payette edged up along the counter.

"North," Jeff said slowly. "Why?"

"Where you headed?"

"South," Jeff answered bleakly. He saw anger build up in Steve's eyes and he began to ease off his stool. "Any business of yores?" he asked coldly.

"It might be," the deputy snapped. "If yore name's Jeff Carter—"

"The name's Jackson," Jeff cut in. "Ben Jackson."

Steve dropped his hand to the heel of his Colt. "Mebbe we better check on that, Jackson. Down the street a piece, at the law office—"

The door behind Jeff opened and the deputy's eyes flicked past him. A man's heavy voice said: "Damn it, Steve, I been lookin' all over town for you. Figgered you'd be in Jake's—"

Jeff eased back onto his stool. The newcomer was the man Muriel had talked to at the alley mouth—the man she had called Buck. He came walking toward the counter, not looking at Jeff, his heavy, lined face strained.

"Red an' Lee Callahan are in town. They're likkerin' up at the Ace-High. I promised Muriel I'd stall them off—"

The deputy frowned. "I'm not duckin' trouble, Buck—"

"Lee's vicious," the older man snapped. "An' he's talked Red into backin' him. Lee's carrying a shotgun. Don't be a fool, Steve. Duck out an' lay low tonight. I'll talk to Red when the likker wears off. He'll lissen to reason—"

The deputy hesitated. "I don't like—" he began, but the sheriff cut him short. "I promised yore wife there wouldn't be trouble. She's been worried sick since she saw Lee an' Red ride into town."

He walked to the back door, stepped out. "We can cut across the lot to Ma Sylvester's. Come on, Steve!"

The deputy shrugged. He glanced at Jeff, hesitated, then turned on his heel. The back door closed behind him.

Jeff's voice broke the silence in the lunchroom. "When's that steak comin'?"

"Soon's it's done!" Payette snapped. A voice bellowed from the kitchen and Jeff's steak appeared in the slot. Payette banged the platter down in front of him, brought pie and slopped coffee into a chipped mug, sliding it along the counter with truculent gesture.

Jeff held down the rise of his temper. Come hell or high water he was going to avoid trouble. He dug into the steak and potatoes, finding the meat tough. But his teeth were good and his appetite was not finicky.

He finished the meal and paid for it with his last gold piece. Pocketing the change he turned and started across the room.

THE DOOR opened. A heavy boot slammed it back against the wall. A redheaded gent wearing a high-crowned black hat stalked into the lunchroom, a sixgun in his fist. He came in looking for trouble, his smoky gray eyes searching Jeff, jumping past him to the man at the counter. He was a giant of a man, looming a full six inches over Jeff, and outweighing him by at least fifty pounds. Jeff was standing in front of him. The giant put out a hairy left arm and swept Jeff aside, spinning him into the empty tables.

Jeff sprawled over a chair. Rage flared

up in him, like burning tinder. The utter contemptuousness of the redhead's gesture was a spark that brought out the ugliness in Jeff. He came to his feet ready to kill.

A rifle stock smashed against the back of his head as he lunged for the big man. He reeled forward, seeing the room in a jumbled light. The redhead had turned around. He planted his huge palm against Jeff's face, and pushed.

Jeff slammed back into the tables, pulling one of them down on top of him. He rolled clear and came up to his knees, his right hand dropping automatically to his holster Colt.

He froze there, staring into the round, deadly ring of a shotgun muzzle.

The man who had hit him with the shotgun stock was a thin, freckled man with a caved-in chest, a slack-jawed, vicious face, and straw hair that matched the color of his eyes.

"Sit down an' keep quiet!" he snarled.

Jeff kept quiet. The redhead was at the counter, peering behind it. He reached across the surface and took a grip in Payette's shirt, pulling him close. "Where's that ring-tailed deputy who came in here? The badge-toter who likes to gunwhip men half his size?"

Payette's face was white. "He went out the back door," he said.

Red Callahan shoved him away. He walked to the door, looked out, then he turned away. "Must have ducked out like a scared rabbit, Lee."

Lee Callahan sneered. He stood five-feet-six in his boots, but the heavy Colt in his belt seemed too heavy for him.

"Probably holed up at Ma Sylvester's. Thought I saw that skirt of his on the street when we rode in."

Red Callahan came back into the room, the gun in his hand looking like a toy pistol. "We'll wait in Jake's," he growled. "I'm dry again."

He walked past Jeff, his hard glance lingering briefly. Lee Callahan waited until his brother was out on the walk. Then he backed out of the room, the shotgun held loosely across his waist, his straw eyes challenging.

Jeff got to his feet and mechanically dusted his clothes. *Hold it,* he kept telling himself. *Hold it, you fool! Don't get mixed up in anything that don't concern you. It's still seventy miles to the Border.*

His hat had rolled under a chair and as he bent for it he heard a man's voice whisper tautly: "If I was Steve Lehman I'd get out of town—fast!"

Jeff tilted the Stetson over his eyes. *Stay out of it,* he repeated grimly. *Or you'll find yoreself at the end of a rope!*

The night air was cooler, coming down from the bare rocks of the San Andres. He paused on the boardwalk. Logic warned him to saddle and ride while the riding was good. But now that the tension had eased he felt his fatigue pull him down, shape his decision.

He turned down the street, looking for a lodging place near where he had stabled his horse. His boots hammered loud on the walk and he was suddenly aware of the unnatural silence.

The Callahans must be plenty malo hombres, he reflected, and an eagerness licked up briefly in him to turn about and walk down to Jake's.

You've got no time for that, he told himself. *Yore dog-tired, an' it's still a long ride to El Paso.*

A sign: "Ma Sylvester, Lodgings," caught his eye. He turned into it.

A gray-haired, buxom woman came out of a back room, a shawl draped across her shoulders. She looked up at him suspiciously in a nearsighted manner.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"Room for the night," he replied.

"That'll be a dollar—now," she said, holding out a hand. "Number eleven, Second floor, down the hall."

The door to number eleven was unlocked. He closed it behind him, tossed his hat on the bed and walked to the window. It looked down on the street and enough light came into the room for him to see by.

A MAN'S voice rumbled through the flimsy partition next door. "I've got to face them some time. I can't stay cooped up here—"

"What about me?" a girl's voice broke in desperately. It was a bitter voice, ragged from crying. "I can't stay here, waiting, eating my heart out, while you—" The volume of her voice fell, and after a while Jeff heard her crying. A man's boots scraped across the floor.

Jeff got up and walked around the bed. A

loose board cracked dismally. He felt dark and lonely and washed out, more lonely than he had ever been. Dave Sanders, who had been with him in the Brad County cattle war, would be waiting for him at El Paso —if Dave had reached the Border.

He paused at the window. A small figure was moving swiftly across the street toward the hotel. Lee Callahan!

He paused just below his window, then moved along the building line and disappeared in the darkness of an alley.

Another figure moved into sight across the street, a tall, broad figure armed with a gun. He came on at a slow, deliberate pace, pausing in the middle of the street.

"Lehman!" he bellowed. "Come out of there. Quit hidin' behind yore wife's skirts!"

In the next room a man's boots scuffed toward the door. Narrow heels tapped quickly after them and the girl's voice, high and breaking, said: "Steve—"

Red Callahan's voice boomed out. "I'm givin' you five minnits to come out! Then we're comin' in after you!"

Jeff checked the loads in his Smith & Wesson, eased the gun back in its holster. He opened the door and stepped out.

Ma Sylvester was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

"Loud-mouthed gent outside's makin' too much noise," Jeff said, smiling. "I couldn't sleep." He glanced toward the rear door. "That lead out to the yard?"

The woman nodded mutely.

"Mebbe I'll be in again—some other time," Jeff said. He touched his hat and turned away and the woman said: "God bless you, son."

He eased out the door, closing it quickly but silently behind him.

A pole-fence separated the back yard from empty lots and the alley leading to the barn was off to his left. He crouched and grubbed around at the foot of the small stoop until he found a hefty stone. Lee Callahan was somewhere out in the dark and he wanted to know exactly where.

He tossed the rock with an underhanded sweep, skittering it along the ground toward the barn. A shadow moved promptly out of the darkness of the alley.

"Over here!" Jeff called grimly.

Lee Callahan jerked around, like a puppet on the pull of a string. Jeff's gun blasted heavily. Lee doubled up, pulling trigger of his shotgun.

Jeff went at a run toward the alley and turned toward the street. He came out into the road before Red Callahan reached him. They faced each other, a thin square of light from an upper window touching Red's bristly face, his heavy jaw.

"I couldn't sleep," Jeff said. "You were makin' too much noise—"

"You fool!" Red snarled. "You damned —"

Jeff's first shot straightened him. He lurched forward, thumbing the hammer of his Colt.

Jeff felt the shock in his right side. He staggered and Red stumbled toward him, mouth working. Jeff steadied his gun and emptied it in the big man's body.

Jeff watched him fall. *Damned fool!* he cursed himself thickly.

A woman's voice cried out: "Jeff!" But he didn't turn, didn't look back.

He crossed the street at a run, conscious of men shrinking away from him. He reached the livery stable where he had put up the black. The hostler shrank back as Jeff lurched inside.

"Saddle that black!" Jeff said thickly.

The hostler did a good job in a hurry. He led the black out of the stall and Jeff swung aboard, holstering his empty weapon with a tired motion. "Open up!"

The holster rolled the big door back. Jeff rode out.

Seventy miles to the Border, he thought. *Maybe we'll get a breather there.*

The black lunged ahead as he touched its flanks with his heels, almost as if he understood.

THE STORY OF THE WEST was written in lead and blood by men as tough as they were straight-shooting. These fighting, devil-may-care builders of the New Empire will come to life again for you in next month's *New Western Magazine*, in tales by such Western writers as Peter Dawson, Tom Roan, Thomas Thompson, Van Cort, and others. Your November copy will be at your newsstand September 26!

The pulpy loan-shark lost control of himself and threw a smashing left fist into Happy's mouth.

A POUND OF LEAD— A POUND OF BLOOD!

By SEBASTIAN BRAND

MOST EVERYBODY judged that Happy Ed Corker was going to get it. They didn't want him to get it, but they figured that it was an open and shut case, and raspy old Judge Lenntil would heave the book at him. They wanted to be on hand to see the heaving.

That was why today the court-house was about twenty times too small. Here it was barely after breakfast, and most everybody from town and the surrounding cow-layouts were funneling into the building like so many steers into a cattle car on their way to slaughter. The main difference is that not everybody was heading for slaughter. Only Happy Ed Corker was

It was Happy Ed Corker who had swum the roaring Canadian to save Jim Harker's life; and it was Happy Ed who had ridden through a howling blizzard to save Bud Whalen's cattle. . . . So when Quick-Loan Turpin needed a neck for a slow-stretch job, what was more natural than to have Happy Ed supply same?

heading for slaughter; and that was the hellish part of it.

Wasn't it Happy Corker who had slapped them salts inside his hat and swum his bronc smack across the Canadian in high flood that time the sawbones couldn't get across and old man fever had Mrs. Harker's kid, Jim, by the throat and was shaking the life right out of him? Wasn't it Happy Corker, too, that had rode near forty miles in a roaring blizzard to save Bud Whalen's cows? And wasn't it Happy Corker who had scrapped and fought to get a school and even a gospel-mill set up in town? You bet it was. And now today it sure looked like Happy Ed Corker would get two, maybe five, years for cow-lifting.

And nobody could do anything about it. A hellish thing, and folks was praying like nobody's business that it just wouldn't happen, as they jammed into the court house.

Joe Roiters stood on the steps. He had just knocked off a nice stack of buckwheats, and, lighting up a seegar, he glanced down the street. A bunch of Diamond-Tail cowboys were trailing up the street towards him. Good guys, Corker's neighbors. They looked sad, they knew Happy's chances were powerful slim.

One said, "He ain't got a chance, has he, Joe?"

"We just don't feel he's a cow-lifter, Joe," said a second. "How you got it ciphered out, hey?"

Joe fingered his seegar and said, "Boys, I only wrangle the news for the town bladder; I don't make it. Also, I'm not a crystal-ball operator, but you fellows know the evidence, so you know what kind of a spot he's in."

"He could of been framed," the Diamond-Tail bronc-stomper put in. "That stuff could of been planted."

"Say, Joe," a newcomer spoke up. "Why ain't you up at the railroad corraling the dope on Nellie Landfree's stop-over? She's sure news. Everybody is powerful curious to savvy why such a renowned and celebrated actress as her is bothering to make appearances down in this God-forsaken neck of the woods."

"Yeah, Joe, what in all dangnation is such a gaudy creetur as her doing round here?"

"I told you," Joe said, "I ain't a crystal-ball man. Facts is what I deal in, boys."

All at once everybody went silent and faces darkened up and scowled over. Joe turned to look and observed a large-framed hombre, with creepy, crawly, fish-belly white skin waltzing towards the courthouse, and he was wearing a brand-new black suit like it was a straitjacket.

"Morning, lads!" he said heartily.

Nobody said much. Pretty soon one waddy got off a "Howdy, Quick-Loan." Quick-Loan Turpin ignored the ice, however, and spoke up, "Well, Joe, how do you figure the trial will turn out? Here, have another cigar."

"This one is plenty enough," Joe said. Joe, like other folk, nursed a sneaking hunch that this beefy critter was the cause of Corker's being accused of cow lifting; most folk knew that Quick-Loan coveted Corker's land that lay along the river and aimed at having it at any cost. "They brought him across from the jail yet?" he asked Joe.

"Don't rightly know, Quick-Loan," said the reporter.

The milky-skinned hombre scowled. He didn't cotton to the handle "Quick-Loan," and that is mainly why everybody called him nothing else but that. Turpin had started in town as a loan-shark. He'd always give you a loan, quick as anything, but always with a spanking big interest roped on.

Thus, after several years of crooked—and shady—dealings he had piled up a heap of money, and even now was trying to maneuver himself into a state senatorship. He was mighty tickled when folks called him Senator and that is exactly why folks near Quick-Loaned him to death.

As he slid on past, a puncher sang out, "Looky yonder-way, across the street. Here he comes!"

It was a pretty large crowd by now and everybody looked over. They were bringing Happy across. They knew that any time now the ornery little judge would show up and things would start popping.

"Buck up, Happy!" somebody hollered.

But old Hap didn't look bucked up. He was a cow-grower of maybe forty summers, with a nice, durable build, and good eyes that stared right at you. He was one sad-looking frijole in his worn boots and sleep-wrinkled jeans, but Happy Corker always

looked sad-like. That was a peculiar thing about him, for in all the five or six years he had been in this neighborhood, nobody had ever caught him smiling. People were curious about this. Most of the boys allowed that some woman had run a sandy on him, somewheres back along the line, before he come Texas way. And it was his sad pan that won him the handle of "Happy."

"Tough luck, Hap!" one of own crew tried to cheer him up, and his own straw-boss said. "Luck, Happy!"

Everybody certainly hated to see him flanked by a pair of lawmen and wearing the steel hobbles, just as if he was a skittish mustang. Some of the boys commenced to jape the lawmen with, "Whyn't you get about four or five more deputies to ride herd on him?" and "How do you bums know you got the right man!" and other stuff.

JOE ROITERS happened to glance up at the doorway and observed Quick-Loan idling there, and he noted that superior and maybe triumphant sneer riding his meaty lips. He was fixing to rub things into Hap as they brought him past.

"Well, it sure looks like it's adios for you, Corker," Quick-Loan suddenly stepped forward and gave Hap a dirty smile. "They got you dead to rights."

It was a pretty measly thing to say, rubbing it in like that, and everybody scowled and looked sourish at Quick-Loan. Happy stopped short and flung away from his herders, to front the burly loan-shark. His eyes blazed.

"You slob, Turpin! You framed me, by George! I'd swear to that!"

Quick-Loan sneered at him contentedly.

"You planted them cowhides near my barn, Turpin. You know I never blotted a brand in my life!"

Quick-Loan was looking pretty well satisfied. This sort of torture pleased him a lot, and Happy went on, "You want me in the jug so I'll default on my loan payments to you. Now you can quietly take over that river land of mine! You framed me, you motherless son!"

Quick-Loan had probably wanted to do some sly gloating, but Happy's angry talk was heard by plenty of folk.

"Shut your jaw," Quick-Loan snarled.

"It's a dirty frame-up, Happy cried.

The deputy lawmen came up and took Happy by the arms again, telling him to tone down. And they still had hold of Happy's arms when the pulpy loan-shark lost control of himself and threw a smashing left fist into Happy's mouth. Happy had his teeth clenched, luckily, or he would have lost every one of them, and blood began to squirt from his mangled lip. Just then an authoritative voice cut in:

"Here, here, what the deuce is going on? This is a court of justice, not a gymnasium!"

Joe recognized this voice, so raspy and different and he looked over. Judge Zeb Lenntil was shouldering up the steps, looking so like a duded-up tarantula in his dark clothes and white hair sticking out all over.

"Take the prisoner inside!" he ordered. "And quiet the courtroom!" He turned to the loan-shark. "I witnessed your actions, Mr.—Mr. Quick-Loan," he said angrily, "and now I am further convinced of your lack of character. As an informal *obiter dictum*, if it were not for the evidence I would throw this case out of court." He added, "Off the record, sir, I think you are a usurer, and a menace to the community, and some day I hope to prosecute you for fraud, larceny—everything—*sic vos non vobis!*"

Nobody knew what the Latin meant, but it was plenty impressive and it seemed to have Quick-Loan scared, but he tried to bluster around and take on airs again after the judge had disappeared inside. But Joe glanced around and saw nobody was impressed, and it seemed that nigh on to everybody on the steps, cow-folk and merchants alike, were pretty sure that Quick-Loan was framing Happy Corker into the state jug. But, with the evidence, they were hogtied.

Mrs. Harker and her boy Jim hurried by into the courtroom and she give Quick-Loan a stare that was loaded with ice and she said, "Hu-umpf!" and just then Bud Whalen went by and said, "That goes for me too, mister, doubled!" and Joe followed him inside.

The courtroom was jam-packed, naturally, and the deputies were having a tough time getting people to quiet down, and the ornery little old judge was setting up behind a sort of small bar-like desk and was

rasping for order and slamming around and glaring.

But the folk were setting there, some quiet, but most were jabbering a blue streak, and Joe had never seen the courthouse so full. Even a couple of ratty-looking nesters were roosting up on the rafters, smoking and looking considerable interested. The jury wasn't cavorting around but was settting quiet and dignified behind a long table near the judge's bar, and at the far end of the table sat Happy Corker, very quiet.

Every seat in the courthouse was filled, most everybody Joe had ever seen was there, even the parson had closed up his gospel-mill and was there, also very quiet; and Joe shouldered through and scrunched in beside him. It was a good seat and he could see everything that went on, the judge, jury, prisoner being less than maybe ten paces distant.

"Order! Order!" Judge Lenntil was uncommon worked up now, working his gravel overtime. "Quiet down, or I'll clear this room!" He skinned right up on top of his bar and hollered down at the people. They shut up pretty quick at this, for they wouldn't of missed this trial for a hundred dollars. They knew Judge Lenntil was capable of most anything. He was ornery when riled.

Once when he got riled at a disturber of the peace for cussing in court and some ladies were on hand, he hove the offender in the jug for one solid year; and another time, when a horse-thief was on trial for hooking not only the treasure box but also the animals right off of the stage, Judge Lenntil fined him only a dollar and let him go free. He was apt to do most anything, especially when women folk were involved; he was a great respecter of women folk, for some reason. And then, pretty soon, just as it got good and quiet, the judge pointed the handle of his gavel at Quick-Loan and hollered out,

"You there! Another yap out of you and I'll have you thrown outside!"

QUICK-LOAN'S dignity was hurt, but he didn't dare talk back, and Judge Lenntil got the trial started pronto, and the cowhides that had been found at the rear of Happy Corker's barn, along with a straightiron, were exhibited around, so's the jury could get a close swivel at them. And meanwhile Happy's lawyer got up and said a lot of good things about him and told what he'd done for Mrs. Harker's kid, and how he had risked his life to save Whalen's cows from a sure die-up; he said some other good things too, but the D. A. kept springing up and saying it was all irrelevant, and the judge, being honest if ornery, allowed this was so, and he told Happy's lawyer to keep to the facts of the case and lay off the preaching and hymn-singing.

Well, right then everybody was in a powerful big sweat. Joe turned around and saw all the gloomy faces and too he saw that Happy figured himself as good as up in the state jug right now, even though the jury was inclined to favor him; he'd get at least two years, which don't seem like much. But it would surely be enough to lose Happy's land for him, and to ruin him as a cow-grower.

At this point most everybody gave Quick-Loan the evil eye. By and by the D. A. laid off the cavorting around and pulled to a stand in front of the jury foreman, leaning down close to his face and saying in a slow and serious voice, "It's your duty, foreman, to bring in a verdict of guilty. I won't say anything more, but remember, this is an open and shut case. The defendant was caught red-handed. Your duty is clear. Don't waste any time deciding."

As the jurymen filed out, the court was fidgety and nobody made any noise. Everybody looked sad. Only Quick-Loan and a couple of his shyster friends were pleased. And, just as the D. A. suggested, the jury didn't waste any time. It seemed they were out less than ten minutes. Mighty serious they filed and all of them set right down, except the foreman, who stood and looked up at Judge Lenntil.

"Your Honor, we figured out a verdict—"

Just then there was a scraping and shuffling of feet outside the courthouse, on the front steps, and everybody turned around in their seats. Judge Lenntil whacked for order, he was about to talk up when a stylish little gent wearing a tall, white fur stovepipe hat, and carrying a cane, popped into sight.

Then, a second later, everybody did gasp right out, for a most splendid woman of

some thirty-five years, more or less, heaved into sight, and she had on the fanciest hat that Joe had ever seen, it had so many ostrich feathers and such-like all over it. She came sailing down the asisle, too, and she was smiling and looking around at everybody, friendly-like, and bowing and smiling, most like a queen.

Joe gulped and gaped and heard some women blurt out, "Lands sake, it's Nellie Landfree!"

All at once Judge Lenntil lost his onery look and broke out a sickly sweet smile, for, sure enough, it was Nellie Landfree. Joe had seen her pictures, and only last week he had wrote a piece about how she sung in front of President Cleveland and how a couple of unemployed kings that were on hand for the free grub were quite took by her.

Joe knew that she wasn't the best actress or singer in the nation, and maybe she was some past her prime and even frayed around the edges and worn-down in spots, but right now, coming down the aisle and smiling, she was powerful stylish and gaudy, and pretty well laid over any other female that had ever showed up in this neck of the woods. There was no question about that. And everybody smiled back at her and nodded their heads, some waving, and all were proud and happy she had come to their town.

As she came forward, Joe happened to glance over and see the look on Happy Ed Corker's face. Happy had gone white as a piece of chalk. His eyes were kind of bugging out. Right then something clicked in Joe's head; he knew that Happy had come originally from some place up in Illinois. Also he knew that Nellie Landfree was from Sangamon county, Illinois, too, for in some papers she was called the "Sangamon Skylark." So Joe was suddenly wondering that if by some chance Happy had known his woman, and maybe if it wasn't her who had run the sandy on him some years ago and turned him into a gent that never smiled any more.

Old Judge Lenntil was intolerable sweet now, grinning like a sick jackass.

"Yes, come right down here, Miss Landfree, come right down. You close your jaw."

This last was meant for the foreman of the jury who was mighty anxious to get the verdict off'n his chest.

"And to what do we attribute this most signal honor, Miss Landfree?" Grinning and drooling, the judge came down in front of the jury table and began shaking hands with her and then the gent in the stovepipe, who was her manager.

Quick-Loan hopped up then and hollered, "I *demand* that the foreman of the jury be allowed to let out the verdict!"

Judge Lenntil swung around very slow. He fixed the loan-shark with the same kind of eyes that a rattler uses when he is fixing to close down on a cottontail.

"How would a small fine and about one year's sojourn in the jail appeal to you, Mr. Quick-Loan?"

Everybody liked this and they chuckled at seeing Quick-Loan shut up so easily. Nobody ever went against the old judge, for he was apt to do most anything, so Quick-Loan could only look hurt and huffy, but Joe noted that he said nothing at all. Then Joe saw Miss Landfree giving the prisoner a kind of dreamy look and she even took a step towards him, but Happy only scowled and looked off down the courtroom, over the heads of the people.

Joe thought he smelt a story here and he kept wondering how in the world he could find out if there was really anything between these two. Miss Landfree was saying,

"My manager had planned this tour along the railroad, and when I found that I was so near your lovely town I simply had to see it."

At this the judge was terrible sweet and the mayor tore up and thanked her for her words and said it was such a great honor at having her for a visit, and then he wanted to know if maybe she would give the folks a little song. She smiled and said she would and everybody began to clap and the nesters up on the rafters began to holler and whistle. Judge Lenntil was so downright overcome by this kindness that he laid around with the gavel and suspended court for a while.

"Court is suspended while we all listen to the beautiful and talented Miss Landfree, who has so kindly consented to sing."

He took her cape and poured her a glass of water. She smiled and said she would like to set down first for a minute to get her breath, since they had just drove in from the railroad. Meanwhile, she smiled,

would the Mr. Justice kindly tell her about the trial? Old Lenntil rasped out that he would be only too honored, too proud, too pleased to do this, and when the mayor butted in and allowed that he might do it better, being a man of speaking experience, the judge offered to throw him out of court *too*.

Then old Lenntil went to explaining all about the case and Miss Landfree listened very interested, and later when he told of how the hides were found on Corker's place and one of the Diamond Tail boys hollered out, "Yeah, and a lot of us figure that Quick-Deal planted them there," Joe observed, after things had quieted again, that she was suddenly mighty interested in the loan-skunk.

She seemed to be making a play for Quick-Loan.

Joe watched her and couldn't help trying to cipher out the reason for this.

OF COURSE Quick-Loan himself wasn't slow to see her interest and plenty pronto he was introducing himself, and Joe couldn't decide whether he was more interested in the diamond brooch she was wearing, or her shape, which was very good. Well, while all this was going on the people kept talking excitedly and staring at her, for it was, without a doubt, an event of considerable magnitude. Then Judge Lenntil wound up, telling how the jury was just about to spill the verdict when she arrived. Her eyes were big and worried.

"You mean Mr. Corker will perhaps go to prison?"

"Off the record, Miss Landfree," the judge said in a low tone, "it looks just like that."

"Why, goodness," she looked uncommon worried, "why, I'm sure Mr. Corker would never steal anything."

The judge said, "The evidence indicates otherwise."

She seemed to be thinking pretty hard about something. She glanced over at Happy again and again, but he acted just as if she was over in the next county somewheres. Pretty soon she quit this and went all out for Quick-Loan. She had him dizzy with smiles and nods and "Oh, you are so right, Mr. Turpin" and "Why, to be sure, Mr. Turpin," so that by and by Judge Lenntil began to look peeved and glare at Quick-Loan, who was swelling up pridefully and looking powerful pleased with himself. Plainly he began to feel that there must be something irresistible about himself.

The people began to get restless, what with waiting for both the verdict and the song, and the nesters were spilling tobacco all over everybody, so the judge asked maybe would she like to sing, and she got up right away and did sing, too, and nobody had ever heard such a grand voice.

She finished up and gave a deep bow, like she had just received a favor from them, and folks shouted their heads off pretty nearly. Then she asked them to name their favorite song and she would be only too happy to sing it for them. Right off the gospel-peddler came sun-fishing up out of his seat and cried out for a doxology, saying he would line it out for her; but everybody hollered, "Set down, set down" and when he tried to settle for *Glory, The Brazen Serpent Hath Fled,* the people would have none of it, and they kept yelling and stomping and were so worked up generally that nobody could understand anything at all.

By and by Miss Landfree put her hands to her ears and smiled, then put forward her left hand, smiling and timid and pretty, and then it was so quiet you could have heard a screw-worm, and she all at once began to sing in a dusky and slow and wonderful voice:

"Fellow Citizens of Texas. . . ." and Joe who had heard Injun fights, stompedes, presidential nominating conventions and all, later allowed that he never in all his career heard a yell like the people let loose when Nellie Landfree finished *that* song. They just about took the roof right off'n the court-house. They must of hollered and stomped for almost ten minutes, maybe more.

And suddenly everybody was up and out of their seats and were coming a-charging and hurrahing down the aisle to surround and thank her. She was the blessedest thing they had ever seen, and Quick-Loan saw a chance to get in strong with her, so he got close to her and hollered that everybody should be careful and not paw and muss her up and to treat her respectful. But everybody kept mashing in towards her and it was pretty much like being caught in amongst a lot of cows in the middle of a

thunderstorm with no way to get out.

Quick-Loan put his arm protective-like around her, but Joe judged he might be trying for a little preliminary courting on the sly. All at once Judge Lenntil appeared, standing on the jury table, and he rasped out that if things didn't sober down immediately, he would make a mass arrest, even if he had to build a new jail to take care of everybody.

In two shakes the place was quiet again, and just when everybody was settled down in their chairs Miss Landfree clapped a hand to her bosom and cried out:

"My brooch—my brooch is gone!"

Everybody, so honored and proud only seconds before, were stunned—absolutely flabbergasted. They looked at her bosom. It was true, the brooch had disappeared.

The judge told everybody to set still and ordered the deputies to take a careful look around the floor. The deputies looked and crawled around for about fifteen minutes while everybody just sat dumb-still and feeling terrible. And then when the deputies stood up and said they couldn't find it, everybody was so embarrassed and felt so bad that they couldn't look Miss Landfree in the face. They could hardly believe that it had been stolen.

Miss Landfree sat at the jury table looking mournful, and Joe saw Happy Corker give her a curious, maybe puzzled, stare. Meanwhile Quick-Loan had hopped up and declared he would find the brooch and began to crawl around and about, but he couldn't find it either. Zeb Lenntil sat up in his place, going from white to pale green, and he just couldn't believe that anything like this could happen in his court; that anybody could be so lowdown measly to steal jewelry off'n a guest, especiallly such a guest as Nellie Landfree, a woman too. By and by Judge Lenntil left off being mortified and he began to get raging mad.

"Sheriff!" he barked. "See that nobody leaves this room. That brooch is going to be found."

Then he ordered the deputies to search everybody in the courtroom, women folk excepted, of course. There was a considerable lot of grumbling, but the gents lined up, and the deputies went to frisking them.

Nobody said anything and it was pretty quiet, and Joe allowed to the parson that he'd sure hate to be the jake caught with the brooch, and the parson intoned righteously, "May God planteth the sinnner in Boot Hill"; and just then Quick-Loan's face went pale and sweaty, for Deputy Sheriff Buck Sanders spun around to face Judge Lenntil and he said, "Look, I got it, Your Honor!"

IT WAS Miss Landfree's brooch, and Buck went on and explained how he found it hooked in, just below the armpit of Quick-Loan's vest. Well, Judge Lenntil's face blacked up like an approaching tornado, but what he said was smothered by the blood-hungry howl that the crowd let out. The crowd was crazy wild. Quick-Loan faced them and shouted, trying to explain that he had nothing to do with the disappearance of the brooch.

"Listen, listen!" he shouted. "It's a frame-up!"

But everybody was pretty sore at him to begin with. They wouldn't listen to him, but he knew it was his only chance. He tried to explain again.

"It's Happy Corker and this woman. They're trying to frame me. They are in cahoots. Corker knows her and he knew her before he came to Texas. I know this, because I seen her picture on the table in Happy's ranch-shack."

Happy's strawboss jumped forward and yelled, "What in the devil were you sneaking around Corker's ranch for anyhow?" and somebody else answered:

"Why, of course, he was out planting them cowhides and the straight-iron, that's what. The polecat!"

Before anybody could grab him Quick-Loan had his gun out, but, at the same moment, Joe sent his .45 sliding down the table, yelling, "Coming at you, Hap!" and then diving for cover. As Happy reached for the weapon Quick-Loan drove a slug into him. Happy jumped and yelled,

"Get back, Nellie," and then he went straight for the crawly-skinned loan-shark.

Quick-Loan's next shot was his last. Happy's .45 bucked only once and Quick-Loan Turpin folded up in a twitching pile in front of the judge's bar. And all the time Judge Lenntil was hollering and slamming his gavel around, demanding silence.

He got it, too. And through the silence and gunsmoke Joe saw the loan-shark twitch twice and then go still. Joe looked

around and blinked. Pretty near everybody blinked, including the judge, for a little ways off to one side was Nellie Landfree and she was in the arms of Happy Ed Corker.

She looked up at Happy and was saying, "Are you hurt, Ed? I have looked and searched for you for so long and in so many places. I couldn't lose you now, I just couldn't bear that." She was gazing at him, dreamy-like.

"I'll never leave you again, Ed."

She was excited, too, and talking her heart out, and just then Judge Lenntel declared that the court was open for business again and the trial would get under way. Nellie Landfree looked over at him.

"Excuse us, Your Honor, but it has been a pretty long time since I've seen Mr. Corker."

Then Happy chipped in, "You see, Your Honor, before she bolted off to be an actress and singer we were bespoken and soon to be married up."

"And that still goes," she looked back at Happy, "even if you go to jail."

Judge Lenntil called for order and tried to look stern and ornery, but couldn't quite cut it, and then he cleared his voice, ground out something in Latin, adding, "Sheriff, the Court directs you to execute a fine of fifty dollars on yonder corpse, for firing weapons in its presence."

The sheriff took a look at Quick-Loan's roll, but said there were only hundred dollar bills, no fifties; Judge Lenntil snapped out that that didn't matter, for the fine was fifty dollars per bullet fired, and so one bill would be exactly enough. And meanwhile Joe Roiters noted that Miss Landfree was touching her finger to her mouth and sucking it just a little, much as if she had pricked it with a pin or such-like, and Joe speculated right then whether there was possibility whatever that she had pricked herself with her brooch pin during the stompede, accidentally getting the brooch itself lost on Quick-Loan's vest. But of course, Joe concluded with a grin, there was no possibilty of this having happened.

Just then Judge Lenntil, suddenly looking like a happy tarantula, slammed down with his gavel and rasped out, that because the D. A. had failed to establish a prima-facie case, that the case of Deaf Smith County against Happy Ed Corker was thrown out of court, and then as the roaring took over he rared up and hollered, "Court dismissed!"

And this time he knew better than to try to stop the noise, and when one of the nesters fell off'n a rafter he ignored that too; and Joe watched the faces of Happy Ed Corker and his bespoken and Joe's eyes fairly bugged right out of his skull, for, it was mighty hard to believe, Happy was wearing a smile a foot long, maybe more.

October's Western Novel of the Month

HELL FANS THESE GUNS

By T. C. McClary

"A gent can be too good, mister—too good to be worth the lead to shoot him down!"

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SMILER WITH A SAW

By JIMMY NICHOLS

ALTHOUGH Waldo Evans, a carpenter by trade, lived for the first half of his life in a frame house on the edge of the rolling Missouri River and, in the years 1850 to 1865, saw some five thousand wagon trains pole across the nearby ford on their way into the sunset, he himself was curiously unmoved by the national surge to the West until he reached the age of forty-three.

At that time, Waldo was called upon to face two emergencies, one personal, the other public, and the only solution he could think of carried him, at long last, across the river. The little woodworker was then under terrific pressure from hotheaded neighbors of both northern and southern persuasion to join two volunteer armies that were being raised in the county to oppose one another on faraway battle fields.

Basically a man of peace, Waldo was wistfully wishing for the war to cease when the final blow fell—his mother-in-law came to live with him. He put up with this worthy but plain-spoken woman for just two weeks. At the end of that time, he set forth in the direction of Kansas. But those who knew him well were not surprised when word drifted back that he had bypassed his destination, wandering past it, somehow, in the dark, and ended up in El Paso, on the Texas border.

Skilled craftsmen and construction workers were scarce and highly valued on the frontier. Waldo, who could build anything from a toolshed to an intricately carved stairway fit for a governor's mansion, was welcomed wherever he went and earned money in quantities that he had never dreamed existed.

With his social security for the first time assured, he revealed a destructive juvenile tendency that had lain dormant for many years.

Waldo became a practical joker.

It all began the day he accepted a contract from Long John Horn, El Paso's first real estate speculator, to build a dozen new houses—more accurately, shacks—at the north end of town. Waldo drew up the plans himself, and as he went to work the next day with hammer and saw, a close observer might have noted a speculative gleam in his wintry blue eyes.

There was a ready housing market in the streams of merchants, cattle shippers, peddlers, railroad workers and fugitive soldiers who poured daily into the border town, and Long John's houses were snapped up at outrageous prices. Horn, swaggering with pride in his own enterprise, played right into Waldo's hands. The little carpenter was nearly beside himself with delight when he heard that there was to be a grand opening of all the new homes, with a ribbon ceremony, free whiskey, and all the trimmings. The new owners were to take possession at exactly the same time.

On the evening of the grand opening, Waldo appeared early at the saloon around the corner from his own lodgings. Through the doorway he could command a fine view of the new houses, standing barren and freshly painted, and the sight seemed to fill him with amusement. From time to time, he let out a snort of unexplained laughter, or covered his mouth with his hand to hide a creeping grin that he could not control.

"Whatcha sniggering at?" the bartender asked him curiously, but Waldo kept his joke to himself.

At midnight, a pink ribbon was stretched across the road that lead into the new development. Long John, using a silver-mounted pistol, broke it with a single shot. There was a whoop, a wild drumming of hoofs and a roar of cheers. The tenants moved in, bag and baggage. Open house was declared and the celebration lasted as long as the liquor held out—about two hours. Then, one by one, the lights flickered out and El Paso was wrapped in slumber—all but Waldo Evans, who squatted on the steps of the closed saloon and waited.

It happened about four o'clock in the morning. The town was jolted awake by a series of grinding, splintering crashes. Shrieks of rage and terror sounded through the darkness. Then a stream of furiously

(Continued on page 96)

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

By Robbins and Farren

Frank Hessen of Dallas, Texas, was against the demon rum. He had to be—it was the only way he could afford to drink. Walking into a saloon, he would stop at the table of a happy tippler and deliver a stirring argument on the evils of liquor. With his saintly face and sober, ministerial clothes, he was almost always convincing. The drinker, instead of burying his nose in the whiskey before him, invariably swore an oath of temperance and, saddened and repentant, left the premises. Hessen would then promptly sit down and drain the abandoned glass!

At the age of 23, Ralph Goodin was arrested by the Sheriff of Tapburg, California, and made to serve thirty days for disorderly conduct. Goodin insisted the sentence was undeserved and he swore to get even. He moved to another part of the state, struck a middling-rich vein of silver, and rose to a position of great wealth and influence. In 1871, he was elected to the California state legislature and the first thing he did was to push through a bill about sanitation and zoning that sounded very civic-minded indeed—but it made the town of Tapburg into a garbage dump!

A favorite story of Bret Harte concerns the time he was traveling in a stage coach between Oakland and Union. A sheriff halted the coach in the middle of the road. "I know there's a pickpocket in hyar," he said positively. "I'm not gonna call any names or embarrass anyone, but I'm advisin' ye —just get off at the next stop and fergit to get back on!" The lawman then departed, after looking warningly at no one in particular. At the next town, all the passengers descended for a breath of air and when the coach rolled on—there were six significantly empty seats—and Bret Harte's pockets were clean.

When ranchers and nesters in the vicinity of Lancon, Texas, carried their disagreements to the point of armed conflict in the summer of 1888, the farmers, applying a scorched-earth policy, converged in a mob upon the town, announcing their intention to burn it down. The mayor, in a panic, wired the state capitol for help: "Riot here. Send Rangers!" On the evening train a solitary Texas Ranger arrived. "B-but there's a hundred fire-breathin' nesters camped on the edge of town!" the mayor gasped. "Why did the governor send only one Ranger?" The lawman shrugged, "Well, heck, you've only got one mob!"

THE CIRCLE CROSS KILLER

"He was killed last night," Rhine explained awkwardly. "We — we don't know exactly how it happened."

Coe Manning's troubles were fourfold: a killer's rep that wasn't rightly his, a strange corpse across his saddle, a bushwhack murder-crew out for his scalp, and a cattle outfit that he could save from ruin only by marrying a girl he'd never seen. And, as for the latter, Coe would rather take his chances with dry-gulchers' bullets any day of the week!

CHAPTER ONE

Free, White, and Hogtied

COE MANNING was eighteen years old to a day when he got a proposal of marriage. It came through Henry Hacker, who owned the Circle Cross spread down on the Brazos where Coe had worked for three years come fall.

Hacker was interested primarily in getting his beef safely to market through dangerous country, and said the whole thing was purely a business deal, and he wouldn't push it down anybody's throat. It had a lot of angles, and a man had to decide a

Stirring Texas Cow-Country Novel

By MARVIN De VRIES

thing like that for himself. Since Coe was footloose, and bespoken to no one, he could do worse than marry this girl, and take up Injun ways for a year or two.

"I'll keep you right on the payroll just like all the rest of the boys," Hacker promised. "All I want is a tie-in with them Kiowas, so I won't git cut to pieces every time I chouse some ration beef up here."

"Cripes," Coe muttered. "I can't do that."

"You're the only one who can, Coe," Hacker stated. "You got a stand-in with them."

"I don't see why," Coe grumbled.

"You saved one of their women folks from drowning one time when you were wrangling horses for the Sterry boys that time they tooken a herd to Montana. They remember that."

"I should've let her drown," Coe muttered, irritably. "How'd they know it was me?"

"They fetched you a present that time, didn't they?"

"Well, yeah, they fetched me some moccasins," Coe admitted. "I like to died. The boys hurrawed me to death."

"That's when they got your name."

Coe looked around with a badgered air, and spatted at the mosquitoes that were coming out in the early dark. They were camped near a sump where the wind hardly touched them. The mosquitoes were fearful, but the grass was lush and thick, and it was easy to hold stock in such a place.

Hacker had been in to Fort Mobeetie during the day, and fetched out Carter Rhine, the Indian agent, to make a tally and take delivery on his ration beef. He was out on the bed-ground now, doing that chore. Hacker had also fetched along this proposition for Coe, but he hadn't had the decency to make it to him in private.

Rusty Shute, who was about Coe's age, and had worked for Hacker the same length of time, was sitting across the fire, pretending not to hear, but he was all ears and smothered guffaws. "Let Rusty do it," Coe muttered, with growing exasperation. "He likes all kinds of women."

Rusty jumped as if he'd been shot. "Don't drag me into it," he shouted. "I don't like Injuns no-how, an' I most surely don't like Kiowas."

"I'm not draggin' anybody into it," Hacker insisted. "I'm just telling you what Mrs. Bascom said, and she mentioned you specially by name, Coe."

"Mrs. Bascom?" Coe asked with a cornered look.

"Surely you know Mrs. Bascom." Hacker said.

"I'm glad to say I don't," Coe answered. "You tell me."

Hacker frowned. "I don't know if I can exactly. Some folks call her Kiowa Kate. She's white, though, an' I understand she's got property." He waved his hand in a wide circle that covered most of the Indian country.

"She's a queer woman, but I guess she stands ace-high with them Kiowas, and what she says goes, mostly. Now, I'm just repeating her proposition, and I'll tell you my side of it. I've lost men and beef out here back through the years, and I'll probably lose some more, off an' on, unless—" he let his thoughts hang there, not wishing to push Coe too hard.

Coe prodded at the green fire, and sent a smudge rolling over the ground. "Did you see the girl?" he asked, finally.

Hacker nodded. "And she's a beauty. Her name's Towhee. She came to Mobeetie with Mrs. Bascom."

"Do you know a beauty when you see one?" Coe asked.

"Why sure I do!" Hacker sputtered. "Hell's bells, I ain't that old."

"Well, your idea might be different than mine," Coe remarked. "Is she fat?"

"Slim as a reed in the tules. She's a redhead."

"Now listen!"

"It's a fact. Kinda red."

"I never saw a redheaded Injun."

"She ain't Injun, I told you."

"You did not."

"At any rate, your eyes'll bug out when you see her."

Now Rusty suddenly came to life. "Well, now, if Coe don't cotton to this idea, mebbe—"

"The proposition was made for Coe," Hacker broke in. "And like I told you, Coe, you'll stay right on the payroll. It'll be your job to give me a stand-in, an' make them Kiowas like Circle Cross beef specially. See what I mean?"

Coe scowled at the fire. Ten to one Hacker had made the proposition to Mrs. Bascom instead of the other way around, or, at least, suggested his name. Coe had a way of getting on with Indians, and Hacker knew it.

Once, when Coe was a little button, a bunch of outlaw riders had camped on Quince Creek, near his father's place. They had two good-looking Indian women with them, and a lot of booze. Coe watched them from behind a tree until near dark. They were a wild bunch, and fought over the women until it shamed him to watch, and he pulled out. But he heard them brawling and wrangling all night long.

The next morning when his father got home from Stole's Station, they were gone, but the two Indian women were dead on the ground. Coe and his father buried them in a secret place, and smoothed the ground over carefully so no one would know. Some of the shame that had been born in him that day for his own kind always stayed with him, and came out when there was talk about Indians or dealings with them.

That was probably why Hacker had thrown this at him. When a man didn't take a stand like everybody else, he got

himself into the damndest kinds of tights.

"WHAT d'you s'pose the girl thinks of it?" he asked, finally.

"Mrs. Bascom made it clear the girl would have her say after she got a chance to look you over. So you're invited to go on a buffalo hunt with the Kiowas. A bunch of Sioux came down for a visit and they're puttin' on a big hunt. You'll see some things you never seen before, Coe, and you'll get a chance to do some sparkin'."

Coe whacked mosquitoes, and prodded the smudge, but said nothing more. Rusty said it was a gay life, living like an Injun with the women doing all the work, and the men having all the fun. Coe didn't believe that trash. A man provided food and shelter, regardless, and with his own strength fought his enemies, and who could say that one minute of one thing was less than a day or a year of something else. But he didn't put in a word.

He let the talk drift around him like an evening breeze, sometimes liking it, and sometimes feeling a cold chill race up and down his spine. Kiowas weren't anything to fun about under any circumstances.

Carter Rhine, the agent, came in on the tail-end of the talk, and after he got the drift he said Coe would lose his scalp in a week if he tackled anything like that. "They're mean and ornery, and they 'ud rather kill a white man than eat. Besides, the girl's bespoken."

"How do you mean, Rhine?" Hacker asked, puzzled. "The proposition came straight from Mrs. Bascom."

"I happen to know Luke Galtus is going to marry her," Rhine stated. "Gabe told me."

Coe gave him a quick look. Gabe's place, the Three Arrows, neighbored Hacker's Circle Cross down on the Brazos. It was a big place, and Gabe's two boys, Clint and Luke, helped him run it. They sold more beef at Mobeetie than Hacker did, and had tried to crowd Hacker out more than once, but it had never come to a showdown.

However, if Luke married the girl they had been talking about, it would probably crowd Hacker out for good. All three Galtuses were mean and ornery, but Luke took the prize. He was always in hot water of some kind, either with a honkytonk girl, or a tinhorn gambler in Outlaw Wells.

Coe had tangled with him before, once when he tried to stomp a sassy saloon swamper to death with his boots and spurs. Coe had sided the swamper, and given Luke a licking, so there was bad blood between them. If this thing Hacker had mentioned became serious, there might be more, although, for some reason, Coe couldn't put much stock in what Rhine said.

"S'pose I beat him to it?" Coe said suddenly.

Rhine shrugged. "I don't think I'll sit around and wait for that."

Coe flushed. Hacker tried to change the subject, and asked the agent about the tally. For his boss's sake, Coe pushed back the urge to give the agent some tongue, and let the conversation drift away. He watched the moon come up, then spread his bedroll, and stretched out full-length.

But he had hardly gotten settled when he sat bolt upright again, listening. Rusty did the same. In a moment, the fast, reckless thump of hoofs on sod drifted in. Rusty held up two fingers. Coe nodded, and got to his feet.

The sound washed out briefly when the riders dipped into a coulee that lay across their path. Then, when they climbed the slope, it came on full-blast, making a quick scared tune. They were heading for the Circle Cross camp, but before they came into the circle of light, the hoofbeats suddenly stopped, and broke up into a spattering of sound, like pebbles flung against a wall. A man let out a jeering laugh, that changed to an angry roar. Then a woman's scream knifed through the air. One of the horses bolted, and the sound raced away as fast as it had come.

Coe grabbed his horse from the picket line, and threw himself in the saddle. Rusty followed. The girl who had screamed was lying on the ground, half-stunned. The man was on his knees nearby, cussing and pawing at her. Coe kicked free of the stirrups, and went overboard. He gave him a hard poke on the side of his head, and sent him sprawling. "Get on your feet, you dirty rat," Coe snapped.

"Watch him," Rusty yelled. "It's Luke Galtus."

Luke's gun blasted before Rusty got the words out. Orange flame spewed up from the ground, and the bullet snapped Coe's

hat-brim, but didn't touch him. He kicked the gun out of Luke's hand before he could get off a second shot.

"You lousy scut," Luke yelped. "Can't a man go ridin' with his girl!" He made a lunge, and clamped his arms around Coe's legs.

Coe crashed to the ground, and Luke clawed his way up to his throat. Coe kneed him hard, and sent him flailing through the grass in a spasm of agony. Rusty tried to grab him, and Coe jumped to his feet. "Keep out of it, Rusty," he yelled. "I'll handle him."

Coe liked this. He wanted to give Luke Galtus a thorough beating with his bare fists. He didn't like the Galtuses. He had seen too much of them riding rough-shod over decent men in Outlaw Wells, and getting away with it because they owned the big Three Arrows spread. Somewhere inside of him there was a natural-born urge to fight them tooth and nail, and this was a chance he didn't want to miss.

Luke was big and brutal, and a hard fighter. Standing toe to toe, slugging it out, he almost brought Coe to his knees. He got in some killing blows, chopping and clawing and punching with a wild fury that almost put an end to the fight before Coe could pay him back. But the savage attack cost him all his wind, and he was wheezing like a spent horse when Coe closed in on him, and started to cut his face to ribbons.

Luke couldn't get out of the way, and he couldn't put his arms up to protect himself. One blow caught him square in the neck, and pulled out a strangled moaning sound. The next one to the belly doubled him up, and then another to the chin almost took his tongue off because he had it hanging out between his teeth.

Coe was pretty sure Luke had a knife, but, with Rusty standing by, gun ready, Luke didn't dare go for it. Toward the end, though, he made a try. Steel flashed, catching moonlight on the blade, and then a gun roared, and Luke Galtus pitched headfirst to the ground with a bullet in his back.

Coe stumbled out of reach, trying to catch his breath. Rusty caught hold of him, and braced him up. "I almost shot the buzzard a long time ago," he muttered.

"You shouldn't have done it, Rusty," Coe got out in a hoarse rasp. "I wanted to beat him to a pulp, but now it's too late."

"I didn't do it, Coe. The girl did."

Coe looked around, trying to wipe the blur out of his eyes with his hand. He couldn't see her.

"She took her shot and dug out," Rusty stated. "I wasn't watching her. I had no idea she'd try something like that. I thought she was knocked out."

She had used Luke Galtus' gun. They found it in the grass, with a simmer of smoke still lifting from the muzzle.

"She was an Injun," Rusty went on, "—leastways she wore that kind of an outfit. But—she had red hair. It looked red in the moonlight—dark red—" He stopped suddenly, and gulped, then went on: "Great balls of fire, Coe! She's that redhead Hacker was talkin' about. Your financeer."

CHAPTER TWO

Night Has a Thousand Eyes

EVER SINCE he could reach a stirrup and throw himself on a horse, Coe Manning had done barn chores, or wrangled horses, or worked cows in the Brazos country. Sometimes he worked for his keep. Sometimes he got a little cash. That poor Manning boy, with his smoky prideful eyes, wouldn't leave the Brazos, in spite of shame and humiliation, so they had to fend for him somehow; and they found out, to their surprise, that he could fend for himself once he had a job.

Growing up in that country, he came to know his own story, piecing together bits of overheard town gossip and bunkhouse talk; and what he heard stiffened his back, and made his eyes smokier than ever.

He didn't remember his mother. Even when he and his pop lived on Quince Creek and caught mustangs, she wasn't there, but the two of them made out together. Later—he couldn't gauge the time exactly—his pop partnered with Frenchy Montel, and they built up the MM Connected, raising beef on the Brazos buttoms near Outlaw Wells. It got to be a sizable place, and they prospered.

Frenchy found himself a bride, some place up north where he had come from, and brought her home. Then trouble started, according to the gossips. Gabe Galtus, who ran a little greasy-sack outfit

near the MM Connected, spread the news that Hale Manning and Frenchy were quarreling over the new bride. It wasn't true, but it made good gossip, and it grew until everyone was watching to see what the outcome would be.

The outcome was a bullet in the back for Frenchy. Gabe said he saw it done, and set the country aflame with anger. Hale Manning, Coe's father, was hanged by masked men to a cottonwood tree that still grew on what had been the MM Connected spread. Frenchy's bride fled, and was never heard of again.

After that Gabe Galtus prospered, and, looking back, it was easy to see how. By the addition of a wing on each side of the brand, the MM Connected easily became Three Arrows, and a lot of MM Connected stock felt the branding iron again. Gabe swallowed the whole place, buying title through a small mortgage Coe's father had put on it before he had gone partners with Frenchy Montel.

There was only one hitch, as far as Gabe was concerned. The banker in Outlaw Wells at the time, Harry Hobart, knew it was a crooked deal from start to finish, including the built-up gossip and the easy way the MM Connected brand could be altered to the Three Arrows. The banker had promoted it, and had done most of the hard thinking which was out of Gabe's line. The banker wasn't banking any more, because he had gotten caught on another crooked deal. But he was still alive, and his name now was Carter Rhine.

Some of the things that had happened Coe pieced together and fitted into place. The rest he didn't know. But he was sure of one thing—it was all a built-up lie about his father. Some day he hoped to find the proof. He was pretty sure he would find it where Gabe Galtus made his snaky tracks.

He realized he was pretty small potatoes to be bucking a place like the Three Arrows. But he knew that a very small leak could sink a big ship, and he had stayed on the Brazos hoping some day to find that leak. He still owned the MM Connected iron, he and Frenchy Montel's bride, if she were still alive. It probably wasn't worth more than a good meal of anybody's money unless he could find proof of what had happened, but it was something to hitch to when he felt low. He felt low now, riding toward Mobeetie with Luke Galtus' body draped over a lead horse, hands and legs flopping with the rhythm of the animal's gait.

Hacker, Rhine, and Rusty rode with him. Hacker was worried. He broke a long silence to say once again that Gabe and Clint Galtus were sure going to raise hell when they heard the news. Rusty said they ought to get hold of the girl, and fetch her along to prove what Luke had been up to.

Hacker shook his head. "We've got to keep her out of it," he insisted. "That's one thing sure."

Carter Rhine agreed. "The Kiowas would set this whole damned country on fire if they knew the facts," he stated. "Hell, if one of their own bucks tried something like that they would tie him to a barbecue pole and roast him alive."

"How many soldiers are there at the fort?" Hacker asked, frowning.

"Ten, and they're all raw recruits. No good to anybody. Captain Horn howls his head off, but it hasn't done him any good."

Hacker growled in his beard, and said he saw no reason why he ought to worry about it. And he went on worrying anyway.

"Maybe we should have planted him, and kept our mouths shut," Rusty suggested.

"Secrets like that don't keep," Hacker objected.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know, but I know we got to keep her out of it. Now look, Rusty, maybe it wasn't her. It was pitch dark. You couldn't be sure, Rusty."

"It was a girl with red hair. She wore a buckskin oufit."

"Dammit," Hacker muttered, "must you be so sure?"

"I kin skip it if you want me to. As far as I'm concerned she could've shot him dead twice, and I wouldn't complain. But s'posin' you do keep her out of it, what then? It wasn't an owl pecked that hole in his back."

"We could tell Captain Horn we found him this morning, just lying out here in the grass. We could skip the fight, and the girl screaming."

"And I s'pose Coe fell over a stump, and got battered up like that. Hell, the Galtuses kin still put two an' two together."

Coe certainly showed the marks of the fight. One eye had a deep blue tinge, and his whole face looked as if he had run head-on into a cactus patch. There was a deep claw mark from his ear to his chin. His ribs hurt him when he took a good breath, and his chest showed welts and bruises.

"We could keep Coe out of sight," Hacker argued.

"I wonder," Rhine put in, "how he got that smaller hole in his arm. A .45 certainly didn't do that."

No one knew the answer. How he had gotten it was anybody's guess. Possibly, the girl had had a smaller weapon, and lost it before she could put it to much use.

"Never mind bothering your brains any more," Coe announced, suddenly. "I'll take the blame."

"You can't do that," Hacker objected. "He's got a hole in his back, and that's murder."

"You can tell Galtus I'm doing it to keep the girl out of it. He ought to be smart enough to see that's the sensible thing to do, if he wants to keep on driving beef up into this country."

Before they got the argument entirely settled, a lone rider came toward them from the direction of Mobeetie. Rhine said it was Laura Horn, Captain Horn's daughter. She rode a big bay side-saddle, and she had the animal in a lather. She had been covering a lot of territory since she left Mobeetie, although the distance was only a few miles from where they stood watching her ride up. She spoke to Rhine, and nodded to the others. Then, when she saw Luke's body on the lead horse, all the color drained out of her face.

"He was killed last night," Rhine explained. "We—we don't know exactly how it happened."

"Who—who is he?" she asked.

"Luke Galtus."

She choked back a gasp of dismay, and swayed visibly in the saddle. It looked as if she had gotten a blow. He thought she was going to slide out of her saddle, and started to move toward her; then her back straightened, and she pulled herself together.

When they started to move again, she kept her nerves under control with an effort. The slow pace finally got too much for her, and she racked away in a headlong rush back to Mobeetie.

Now what, Coe thought, does Luke Galtus mean to her? Luke wouldn't have the gall to spark Captain Horn's daughter—or would he? He was sure that what he had seen meant something, but exactly what it was he would be a long time finding out.

TRAP CREEK, bright and clear, and shallow as a pane of glass, wandered aimlessly along the route Hacker had picked to get to Mobeetie. Where the sparkling water rested a moment in a deeper pool, Mrs. Bascom and Towhee, the girl she had brought up from babyhood, had spent the night. Mrs. Bascom was well along in years. Her hair was gray, and her face deeply lined, but her eyes were as clear and bright as ever. Now they were filled with affection as she watched Towhee combing her hair at the edge of the pool, using the water for a mirror. Mrs. Bascom knew the girl had ridden off during the night, and it hadn't taken her long to find out why.

Towhee had confessed she had gone to get a look at the man Mrs. Bascom had told her about—the Circle Cross puncher, Coe Manning, who had been invited to join the coming buffalo hunt. "I shouldn't have let you go," Mrs. Bascom said, with a worried look in her eyes.

"But you were asleep. You didn't know."

"Oh, yes, I did," Mrs. Bascom said, smiling briefly.

Towhee blushed. "You guessed what I was up to."

"Yes. I suppose I talked too much about him."

"You talked a lot, but he is all you say."

"I'm glad you think so, Towhee."

"When shall I marry him?"

Mrs. Bascom laughed outright. "First wait and see what he has to say about it."

"He probably won't want me," Towhee pouted.

"You're attractive," Mrs. Bascom told her. "At any rate, we'll see. I told Mr. Hacker we would wait here by the pool for his answer."

The worried look came into her eyes again. She knew the whole story. Towhee had intended to ride out to the Circle Cross

camp to get a look at Coe Manning, but before she got there, she had run head-on into a girl and a man, having an argument that had suddenly exploded into gunfire. Towhee had recognized the girl. It was Laura Horn, Captain Horn's daughter. Towhee didn't know the man. After firing three shots at the man, and missing them all, as far as Towhee could tell, the girl had swung away and raced back toward Mobeetie.

The man didn't follow. Towhee had tried to get away unobserved in the darkness, but the man had caught sight of her and followed. Just short of the Circle Cross camp he had caught her and thrown her to the ground. Towhee's scream had brought help.

Mrs. Bascom shivered suddenly. She didn't regret what Towhee had done when she saw her assailant draw a knife on Coe Manning, but she knew it would have serious repercussions unless the whole thing was hushed up. She doubted seriously if it could be done. All at once her look shifted, and she got to her feet. "Here they come," she announced.

Towhee gave herself a last long look in the water, and stood up, "slim as a reed in the tules," as Hacker had said. And Hacker hadn't been wrong about the rest of her, either. Her face was golden brown, smooth as velvet, and her eyes had a deep dark look that was shy and mischievous at the same time. Coe sat and stared unbelievingly when he first saw her.

Hacker pretended the meeting was accidental, and made out he was surprised to see them again. "Imagine meeting you here," he exclaimed. "I was just telling the boys I knowed a pool down here where we could water the horses. I had no idea we'd run into you. Coe, this is Mrs. Bascom."

Coe pulled his eyes away from Towhee, and dismounted. "I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said, in a subdued voice.

Mrs. Bascom inclined her head. "Towhee, come here."

Towhee approached.

"This is Coe Manning, Towhee," Missus Bascom said. "I've spoken to you about him."

"Oh, yes," Towhee said, as if she could scarcely recall the name. But she held out her hand, and Coe took it, and held it a long time—until Rusty stepped up, and nudged him for an introduction to her.

Mrs. Bascom walked away with Hacker. She didn't waste a look on Rhine, and didn't speak a civil word to him all the while he was there. To the others, she was amiable and kind. Coe had heard her spoken of as Kiowa Kate, and he wondered if there was another harder side to her character that helped her face all the problems that must beset a woman in her position.

Towhee carried on some talk with Rusty, but neither mentioned what had happened the night before. Through it all Rusty squirmed and twisted, as if he had never spoken to a girl before. "Cripes," he told Coe later, in a guarded whisper. "I thought I'd have to talk Injun, but she kin spout English like nobody's business. She just floored me."

"She's a pretty girl, Rusty."

"You don't need to tell me. Old Hacker sure was right, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he sure was."

"She ain't as old as you are, Coe. I think she's more my age."

"How do you know?"

"Well, she—she's no more'n busted out, here and there." Rusty blushed. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I believe I do. But you're just as old as I am."

"Not by a coupla months."

Nobody mentioned Coe's battered face, or the corpse on the lead horse. Hacker inconspicuously pulled a tarp over the body because of the blow flies. No one asked any questions or offered any answers.

"Well, what do you say, Coe?" Hacker asked when he got a chance.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Coe said. "I'll take their invitation to go buffalo hunting. But I want it understood there's no obligation involved—not right now, anyway." He flushed a little. "Hell, Hacker, a man can't say offhand he'll marry a girl the first time he looks at her."

That was what Coe said, but he knew right then and there, that he could. Remembering what he looked like, though, he figured she probably wouldn't have him anyway, unless she made big allowances for the fight he had been through.

Mrs. Bascom gave him the invitation personally again. She said there were some hundred and fifty Sioux and Kiowa going

on this hunt, and place and preparation had been made for him to join them. "You will be treated kindly. Like a brother," she said. "You have nothing to fear."

"I am much obliged for the chance," Coe answered.

Hacker was glad to see it work out this way. "We'll take care of Galtus, and let you know how it stands," he told Coe. "When you make up your mind, we'll all come to the weddin'."

"Don't talk so loud, for Pete's sake," Coe muttered.

Rusty, Hacker, and Rhine pulled out as soon as they could without being rude, Hacker hurrying them along because he had a tough situation licked. He didn't want to give Coe a chance to change his mind.

AFTER they left, Coe didn't know what to do with himself. He felt foolish standing around, and thought he was making a poor impression. Mrs. Bascom watched him as she might a boy in knee britches, gently indulgent, and ready to make any allowance. Coe thought she was wonderful, because it had been a long time since he had seen anything like affection in anyone's eyes. His heart warmed to her, but it didn't save him from feeling foolish.

Towhee busied herself breaking camp, and Coe tried to help her, but she wouldn't have it. "Woman's work," she told him, a secret little smile twisting her mouth. "You will rest, please."

Mrs. Bascom nodded. "Let it be so, Coe."

"Well, okay," he muttered.

It was that way when they rode on. Both of them deferred to Coe, although Mrs. Bascom did it with a secret smile. She had a tact that was hard to beat, and Coe didn't wonder she had survived the long years, and even made an honored place for herself among people who held women in low esteem.

But he spent most of his time wondering about Towhee: how she had come to be placed the way she was; whether she was some kin to Mrs. Bascom; of all the pains it must have taken Mrs. Bascom to make her what she was. He found out a little that night, sitting around the tiny puddle of coals that sent blue and red flame vaporing up between them.

Mrs. Bascom had been captured by the Kiowas when she was a grown woman. At first her lot had been a rough one. She had tried many times to escape, but never quite succeeded. Her knack for nursing finally won her a place, and they began to treat her kindly. Later, when she had a real chance to leave, she had stayed instead.

When she finished that brief summary, she took a stick, and drew a design on a spot of bare ground near the fire. It was the MM Connected brand, and when she had it finished she added a wing on each side, and made it Gabe Galtus' Three Arrows. "That is what we will talk about," she said.

Coe's interest sharpened. "That MM Connected outfit belonged to my father," he told her.

Mrs. Bascom nodded. "Yes, I know. At first it belonged to him. Then he took a partner, whose name was Etienne Montel. They called him Frenchy." She stopped a moment, and took a deep breath. Then she turned to Towhee, and said: "He was your father, Towhee."

Towhee glanced up, her eyes suddenly glowing. The name rolled over her lips in a silent whisper, and she seemed to like the sound of it. "You never told me before," she said.

"There is a time for everything," Mrs. Bascom answered.

"How do you know all this?" Coe asked.

"Towhee's mother told me much, and I have made it my business to find out more," Mrs. Bascom said. "Down on the Brazos where all this happened, they tell the story one way but I will tell you the true one."

"I'd sure admire to hear it," Coe muttered.

Gabe Galtus came into the story right from the start. He had started the rumor about Coe's father and Frenchy's new bride. He had made it up out of whole cloth, and added to it from time to time so that what happened later would look reasonable. He had named his little greasy-sack spread the Three Arrows, because he saw how he could use that iron to blotch MM Connected stock and swallow up the whole place when the time was ripe.

"The other man who was in on the scheme was Harry Hobart, the town banker. Possibly you've heard of him, Coe?"

Coe nodded. "He got caught in a crooked deal and went to the pen."

Mrs. Bascom went on:

"One of Galtus's tough gun hands killed Towhee's father after the rumors had been built up enough so a shoot-out between Coe's father and Frenchy Montel wouldn't surprise anyone. Gabe Galtus himself led the masked men who hanged your father, Coe. Gabe intended to marry the new bride himself, but she fled. She tried to get back to her people in Canada, but she didn't get much further than the Red River. My people found her, and brought her to me. Towhee was born soon afterwards, but her mother died."

Towhee tilted her head to one side, and wiped away the tears that gathered in her eyes. "And what was her name?" she asked.

"Julie," Mrs. Bascom said.

Towhee nodded, and swallowed hard to get back her self-possession. Coe stared down at the puddle of coals. "I've guessed a lot of that," he said, finally, "but there was no way of knowing."

"No one can undo evil. Nor pick up ashes and rebuild a burned house. But a man can take back his own. The Three Arrows belongs to you and Towhee, and you must find a way to get it back."

"If I could pick up the trail of that snaky banker, maybe I could get somewhere," Coe muttered. "But I s'pose he's dead by now."

"No, he isn't dead," Mrs. Bascom said. "He broke out of the Texas penitentiary five years ago, and turned up again as an Indian agent named Carter Rhine."

Coe smiled for the first time, and looked at Towhee. "I guess mebbe we'll have to put off that buffalo hunt for a while," he said. "And—and the rest of it, too—for a little while."

Towhee smiled back. "I can wait—a little while."

Mrs. Bascom held up her hand suddenly, and leaned forward listening. Coe didn't move. Out in the night he could hear only one small sound, the fretting of a nesting bird, uneasy at their presence. The howling of the coyotes had stopped. The horses on the picket line held their ears alert.

Mrs. Bascom finally leaned back, and, quiet-spoken as ever, said: "Pretend you do not know, but we are being watched. One of us should get away from the fire."

CHAPTER THREE

Killer Breed

COE stretched, and got to his feet. He started to move in a circle, whistling a tune while he tried to figure out from the animals on the picket line what direction to take. Towhee and Mrs. Bascom stayed where they were, pretending to settle down for the night. Mrs. Bascom had the carbine she always carried near her. Towhee wasn't armed.

Coe finally walked toward the horses, intending to get away by keeping in the shadows they cast, but before he reached the picket line a man called out, halting him in his tracks. "Stand right there, mister, and reach," the man ordered. "You women-folk git up, and keep your hands high." He raised his voice. "Okay, boys, close in."

There were three of them, and they came from different directions. Coe had seen all three of them before in Outlaw Wells. They were Three Arrow riders—Taw Hueling, Harp Milton, and a breed called John Hiccupi. Taw Hueling was giving the orders. "You ride for Hacker, don't you?" he asked Coe.

Coe nodded.

"You kinda mess us up," Taw admitted, tipping his hat sideways and scratching his head. "What the hell you doing out here anyway?"

"I could ask you the same," Coe remarked.

"You'd git the same answer," Taw said with a brief grin.

"Cut out the palaver, Taw," Harp Milton put in. "Let's get this over with."

"What'll we do with him?" Taw poked a thumb at Coe, and waited for an answer.

"I guess there's only one thing to do," Harp said, finally.

"Yeah," Taw agreed. "I guess so." He turned to Coe. "I guess we got to croak you, Kid."

"Yeah?"

"We didn't expect to find anybody out here except the two women."

"Don't apologize," Coe told him. "I know how it is with you stinkers. You can handle a pair of women, but—"

"That's enough, Kid," Taw growled, his eyes suddenly aglitter. It took him a mo-

ment to pull his temper down again to consider the situation. "Yeah," he concluded, finally, "I guess it's the only thing to do. John, rattle your hocks."

"Me?" the breed asked, coming out of a trance that had fastened his eyes on Towhee.

"Take this jasper off out there in the dark, an' come back alone."

"How you mean?"

"Do it in your own sweet way, John."

"I kin do it right here."

" 'Tain't nice in front of the ladies. Now, dammit, get movin'." In spite of his easy talk, Taw's nerves were tight. Coe had touched a sore spot with his reference to the women.

"How you know we ought to plug him?" the breed muttered. "Gabe said—"

"Will you keep yore big mouth shut?"

"If I beef him and Gabe raises a howl, I won't take the blame."

"Well, what do you want to do with him—turn him loose?"

"Gabe said to beef Mrs. Bascom, and bring the girl to him. That's all he said. He didn't say anything about—"

"Goddlemighty! For two cents, John, I'd plug you. A man's got to use his brains once in a while, don't he? I realize that lets you out because you ain't got none, but I'm tryin' to think for you, see? Now go on, and do what I say."

Harp took Coe's weapon, and the breed took over, grudgingly. They walked away into the dark, Coe in the lead, the tall grass whispering against his boots with a thin edgy sound. He recalled what Carter Rhine had said in camp the night before about Gabe Galtus's plan to marry Luke off to Towhee. He knew that what was happening now definitely tied in with that plan. Possibly he should have made his play before they got his gun, but it would have been a wild and reckless thing to do with three guns bearing down on him. More than likely a try like that wouldn't have worked.

His time was running out fast now. The breed wasn't going to walk far before putting a bullet through Coe's back. He didn't dare think what would happen to Mrs. Bascom and Towhee in the meantime.

The breed probably wasn't anyone to fool with. He was out of sorts though, and pretty short on brains. *If I could talk him into some kind of a mismove,* Coe thought, *I could get back there and get the drop on them.*

"What's Gabe trying to do, anyway?" he muttered over his shoulder. "What does he want with the girl?"

The breed mumbled something about Luke, but Coe didn't catch it. "Speak up, man," he snapped. "Don't mumble so."

"He's going to marry her off to Luke," the breed repeated.

Coe laughed bleakly. "That's a good one."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Luke's dead."

"Don't make me laugh."

"It's a fact."

"Whoa. Pull up right here. What's this about Luke?"

Coe stopped and turned to face him. "Luke's dead. I ought to know."

"Why?"

"Uh—I killed him."

The breed soaked that in. "Well, that don't bother me none."

"When he finds it out, Gabe'll want to tear me apart. When he finds out you plugged me, he'll take it out on you."

The breed thought that over. "I better do what Taw says."

At least, Coe thought, *I gained a little time. I'm not going to get it in the back unless he turns me around again.*

It was lighter than it had seemed when he was sitting by the fire. The breed stood a little too far away to take a chance of diving at him. A small woolly cloud darkened the moon briefly, and then raced away. An animal stirred the grass nearby.

HE REALIZED his nerves were tight as bowstrings. The four figures at the campfire showed blurry and indistinct, standing like trees. A horse nickered, and the sound went rolling through the night. Another cloud came, and raced after the other.

"For the love of Pete," Taw yelled at the top of his voice, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Hurry it up, John."

The breed mumbled an oath and got himself set.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Coe said, pretending the words were pulled out of him in sheer desperation. "I'll give you this if you clear out!" He held out his hand,

palm up. "You can fire off a couple shots and go back. I'll walk on, and nobody'll be the wiser. Otherwise, I'll throw it a mile away, before you make a move, and you'll never find it in this grass."

Coe's proffered hand was empty, and it didn't strike him that he'd made a very good bluff. The breed leaned forward to see what he had, and unable to make anything out, took a short step forward.

Coe threw himself sideways, whipping one leg up with all the drive he could put in it. It caught the breed in the belly, and brought out a hollow anguished grunt. The breed's gun flamed, and the bullet raked along Coe's leg like a hot iron. It didn't down him.

Coe kicked again, this time with the other leg. His boot struck the weapon, knocked it to the ground. The breed went after it, and Coe jumped him with both feet. One boot struck the breed in the face, raking it from top to bottom. The other struck him lower down, sending him sprawling. Coe landed with a hard thud. He got the weapon and when the breed came up out of the grass he shot him pointblank through the head.

Back in camp, Towhee heard the shot, and she winced visibly. Then she bit her lip hard. Mrs. Bascom stood quietly, her hands clasped in front of her, her head tilted slightly to one side so she could watch the play of color in the fire.

In spite of his bluster and his easy talk, Taw felt queasy as a girl about carrying out Gabe Galtus's orders. For some reason he felt obliged to justify himself. "It ain't my doing," he told Mrs. Bascom. "It's just the same as if Gabe stood here doin' it himself. Ain't that right, Harp?"

"Sure, it's right," Harp growled. "Now go ahead."

"You kin turn around, lady," Taw suggested. "It'll be easier—for you, I mean."

"This will do quite well," Mrs. Bascom answered.

Taw muttered under his breath, something to the effect that a fool woman always wanted to be contrary no matter what. Then he looked off into the dark. "What ails that damned breed," he fumed. "Why don't he get back here? Hey, John!"

"Here he comes," Harp said.

But it wasn't the breed. It was Coe Manning. His sore leg slowed him up considerably. In spite of all the speed he could put on, he didn't get back quite in time. He hear Harp prod Taw along, and then he saw Taw raise his gun and level off.

In spite of the distance and the poor light, he pulled up and got off a shot. It was too late. Taw fired, and Mrs. Bascon staggered, and went to her knees. But his shot had spoiled Taw's, knocking him around in a full circle and throwing him to the ground.

"John, you sneakin' buzzard!" he yelped. "I'll—"

"It ain't John," Harp cried, and took a quick shot that was a clean miss.

He backed away from the light, losing sight of Coe while he was at it. He didn't locate him again until Coe tried another shot. Then it was too late. The bullet caught Harp in the neck, and blood gushed out of him in a vivid crimson flood. His hands came up, and he flung his gun as far as he could throw it. He probably had no idea what he was doing. He started to twist in a slow circle, his legs curling together. Then his head flopped on his chest, and he crashed to the ground.

Taw lasted longer, because Coe's first shot had knocked him to the ground. He had sense enough to stay down. Towhee helped rout him out of the grass with the carbine Mrs. Bascom always carried, making her way around to the opposite side, and throwing shots down at Taw until he finally jumped to his feet and tried to scramble off into the dark. Coe fired twice. The first shot staggered him and the second brought him down again in a head-on dive that took him clear into the darkness. He didn't know it. A long long darkness had closed in on him.

HENRY HACKER had a deep respect for Mrs. Bascom, and he was pretty sure there was more behind the odd proposal of marriage he had relayed to Coe than met the naked eye. He knew Coe's story. He had heard all the gossip about Coe's father and Frenchy Montel, but he wasn't at all sure any of it was true. Of course, the story had been an old one long before he came to Outlaw Wells, and he hadn't known any of the participants so he couldn't be sure of the facts.

But he did know Gabe Galtus, and he was pretty sure there was something

crooked in the way he had gotten his claws on the MM Connected spread, and gobbled it up. Coyotes didn't tackle cougars in the broad light of day and eat them up. Hobart, the Outlaw Wells banker, might have had something to do with it. There was bank paper involved, and he had landed in the Texas pen later for another crooked deal. But Hacker had never known him, and he couldn't swear to that either.

At any rate, he hoped Coe would some day find out the truth. It hung over him like a shadow that kept getting darker and darker.

After leaving Coe behind at the pool with the two women, Hacker, Rusty, and Carter Rhine continued on to Mobeetie with Luke Galtus' fly-blown corpse. Noonday heat poured down, and they didn't waste much energy in talk, although Rusty couldn't get over Towhee's looks, and every once in a while blurted out something that showed where his thoughts lay. Rhine didn't say a word all the way.

Hacker's main concern was to get into Mobeetie without running into Gabe. He wanted to get to post headquarters and place the whole situation before Captain Horn before Gabe could fly off half-cocked and make trouble. Possibly the captain already knew what had happened. His daughter had looked sufficiently excited and alarmed when she had run across them earlier in the morning.

When at last they rode into Mobeetie, Hacker spotted Gabe's horse at the tie-rail in front of the town deadfall. He glanced at Rusty and Rhine, and both of them looked as if they wished they were somewhere far away. Neither said a word.

As a matter of fact, Gabe saw them through the window. A dead man's body lashed to a horse's back looks just like what it is, even if it is covered. Gabe saw it going by and made a brief remark about it to his boy, Clint. But, other than that, he gave it no heed. He was much too busy with his own affairs, and the particular affair that occupied him right now was to get Parson Sam thoroughly boozed up. He had a chore for the parson as soon as Taw and Harp and John Hiccupi returned with the girl.

Rhine, the dirty sneaking buzzard, had told him only the day before who the girl was. He was sure Rhine had been cooking something up for himself in regard to the girl. When he heard Mrs. Bascom had something else brewing, he had come running to Gabe for help. It was a dangerous situation that might lose him the Three Arrows unless he acted fast. He wanted a good legal ceremony out of Parson Sam even if the old fool had no idea what he was doing.

The parson had no idea why he had suddenly become the recipient of Gabe Galtus's bounty, but he took to the treatment like a bear to honey. He was a bandy-legged little runt, sick and rheumatic, and his sky-piloting days were over because he had fallen a victim to strong drink. He could soak it up by the gallon, and, as Gabe knew, it took the better part of the day to get him feeling mildly rosy.

For that reason Gabe had started in early, so that when it came time to hitch Luke and the girl, he wouldn't know Genesis from Leviticus, and—more important—wouldn't realize the girl was putting up a squawk. It was cheap liquor he was pouring into the parson, but he figured it would do the business.

"Where in hell is Luke anyway?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Clint muttered. "I can't keep track of him."

"I told you and Luke to get back to camp last night. Where you been?"

"I been pokerin'," Clint confessed. "Luke found himself a girl." Clint was a year older than Luke, and he had considerably more brains. He spent most of his time in gambling joints and honky-tonks, and let Gabe do the worrying for the Three Arrows.

He was tall and well-built, but he had a bad complexion he had picked up off a thousand poker tables, and his eyes were as hard and cold as glacier ice. The biggest accomplishment of his life had been the shooting of a tinhorn gambler in a border-town brawl. He fancied it had made a man of him.

"There's no girls in this place," Gabe stated, looking around.

"She wasn't a honky-tonk girl," Clint said with a grin. "Luke went classy on us. He went a-ridin' with the Captain's daughter."

"You're a liar, Clint."

"I seen 'em ride off in the dark. She's

quite a gal, too. I'd like to been along to help Luke out."

"Luke don't need no help," Gabe muttered, sourly. "Did you see 'em come back?"

"They didn't come back together. I seen her come back alone, and it wasn't very long after they left, either."

"Well, where is he then?"

"I don't know I tell you. I thought mebbe they got into a quarrel out there—" he laughed slyly—"so he went back to camp, an' let her trot home alone. I don't know anything about him. Mebbe she beefed him." He laughed again.

"Well, he'd better show up. If he don't, you're goin' to marry this girl I picked out for him."

Clint let out a sudden snarl. "Listen, you kin fix Luke up all you please. Don't bother me. Don't think I'm goin' to marry no squaw."

"She ain't a squaw. She's just as white as you are." He tilted his head toward the parson. "And don't talk so loud."

"I don't marry nobody."

"We'll see about that."

The parson emptied his glass, and made it clatter on the bar so Gabe would know it was empty. "Fill 'er up, Sam, and drink hearty," Gabe bellowed, slapping him on the back.

"Mighty kind of you," the parson muttered, his watery eyes fastened on the gurgling bottle. "Mighty kind."

"Mebbe it is, at that," Gabe remarked.

PROBABLY not more than twenty minutes after Hacker, Rusty, and Carter Rhine had ridden past, Rhine came back on foot and entered the bar. He was a teetotaler, but he had been in the place before. The barkeep set a glass of water in front of him. Rhine looked as if he needed it.

"What ails you anyway?" Gabe asked, faintly contemptuous. "Hacker been feedin' you horsemeat?"

"It's about Luke, Gabe. He's dead."

Gabe's drink splashed over his fingers. His arm swung around like a wildcat slashing at an enemy. He grabbed Rhine by the shirt and shook him. "What's that you said? What're you tryin' to tell me?"

"Luke's dead, Gabe. We just came in with him."

"Who done it?"

"I—I don't know, Gabe. You better come over to the post."

"You tell me right here an' now."

"What'd he say?" Clint put in.

"Shut up," Gabe snarled. "Go ahead, Rhine."

"I don't know who did it," Rhine insisted. "You better come along."

Gabe didn't waste another word. He was short and stocky and there wasn't a shirt made that was big enough for his shoulders. Every time he made a quick move he popped out at the seams. And that was what happened now when he brought his fist back and sent it smashing into Carter Rhine's face.

It was a hard blow sending Rhine spinning along the bar. When he reached the end of it he went floundering into the corner with a thud that shook the rickety building.

"You talk when I tell you to, you hear?" Gabe flared.

Rhine lurched up, and staggered to a chair. He was choking, and gulping, and trying to straighten his jaw around, and then, with a sudden surprised look, he picked a loose tooth out of his mouth. He looked at it for some time, rolling it between his fingers, then flipped it at a spittoon. "I—I won't stand for anything like that, Gabe!" he muttered, his voice rising hysterically. "You just remember I got the whip-hand over you, and I'll keep it."

"Don't talk so big," Gabe growled. "You ain't got nothin', except what I let you have. You remember that. I kin send you back to the pen any time I got a mind to, an' I damn near got a mind to right now!"

Rhine's face went whiter still, and he glanced at the barkeep and Parson Sam. Sam wasn't paying much attention but the barkeep was all eyes and ears. "I've got the whip-hand," Rhine repeated, trying to convince himself.

"How?" Gabe moved in closer, menacing and vicious. If Rhine had had any sense at all he would have kept his mouth shut. But he didn't.

"I can turn you out of the Three Arrows any time I want to, just remember that," he muttered.

"How?" Gabe asked again, moving in still closer.

Rhine told him, probably with the idea that he could save himself another beating.

"I got it down in black and white, Gabe. I used to be the boss in this set-up, remember? You did what I said." His talk had a bad lisp.

"Don't get so damned cagy," Gabe snarled. "What's this in black and white? I never put anything in black and white. You talkin' about way back there when you run the bank?"

"That's what I'm talking about."

"What's this in black and white?" Gabe muttered.

"Never mind. I've got it."

Gabe walked in again, and gave him another hard punch on the side of the head. Rhine went off his chair, and slid along the sawdust.

"For Pete's sake," Clint muttered. "If you want him to talk, don't knock his head off."

"You keep out of this, you damn' boozer," Gabe flared.

"I can hang you," Rhine groaned from the floor.

"Where you got this black and white stuff?"

"I got it. And it will hang you. I'll give it to Coe Manning. I'll give it to Coe Manning. It'll show him where he stands, if he doesn't know now. And he'll make a damned tramp out of you again, just like you were the first time I set eyes on you."

"I'll kill you right here and now."

"It won't help you any. They'll find what I've got."

"Where you got it?" Gabe kicked him again, and it was all he could do to keep from drawing his gun and shooting him through the head. But he had sense enough to hold back. He had to find out more about this black and white business, and he went at it again, with more abuse and punishment.

But, in spite of all his efforts, he had gotten all he could out of Rhine, except a quiet, bleating sound. He stood that as long as he could, and then he picked Rhine up off the floor, and stood him against the wall. He held him there with one hand while he beat his face to a pulp with the other. He let him slide and kicked and trampled him from head to foot. There was scarcely a whole piece of hide on Rhine's body.

The barkeep, white as a ghost, looked on; if he had had half a chance, he would have grabbed the scatter-gun he kept under the bar, and blown Gabe to pieces with it. But Clint, siding his old man for a change, kept a cold eye on him. He didn't dare to risk it.

When Gabe got through, he was wheezing like a spent horse. He moved to the bar with short clipped steps, and leaned his elbows on the edge.

"Parson," he gulped, "you get outa here. I'll see you later. And keep your trap shut, or you'll get exactly what he got. I told him to talk, an' he wouldn't. An' I'm tellin' you to keep your trap shut, an' I'll back it up the same way. Now git."

"Go on, beat it," Clint chimed in.

Gabe turned to the barkeep. "The same goes for you. Git that mess in a back room, an' keep him there. If anybody finds out where he is I'll shoot you on sight. You un'erstand me?"

The barkeep nodded, biting his lip.

"You stay here, Clint," Gabe went on, "an' see he don't go shootin' off his mouth. That's all. I'm goin' to see Cap'n Horn."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gathering of the Buzzards

THERE WERE things at stake that Gabe Galtus never expected to be at stake. Gabe had helped Rhine break out of the pen because he had use for him at Mobeetie, and could get him posted there without much trouble. Because Rhine was a jailbird with a bounty on his head, Gabe had figured it would be easy to hold him down.

Between them they had made a pretty good thing of it. It gave Gabe a chance to get rid of his runts and culls and whatever wet stock he might happen to have at top prices. Now, just because he'd got a poke in the nose, Rhine had threatened to bust out in all directions.

Now that he had cooled off, Gabe realized he shouldn't have flown off the handle. He had, though, and if that "black and white" business of Rhine's was more than bluff and brag, it was high time he flew off some more. It was time he got to the bottom of it. It went to the very root of everything he owned.

Coe Manning's name popped into his head like an exploding shotgun shell. So far, he had been tolerably easy on the pride-

ful little range orphan, because he hadn't wanted to stir up sleeping dogs. At this late date, if Rhine could doublecross him and furnish proof of what had actually happened when he moved in on the MM Connected, it was time he got out his bushwhack gun again.

He wracked his brains trying to think what Rhine's veiled threat meant; whether at any time he had made a move that could even now make him gallows bait. There was one thing that gave him an uneasy twinge. Rhine, or Hobart, as he had called himself then, hadn't allowed Gabe to come into the bank at any time. Whatever information was necessary to exchange between them was left at a private postoffice they had organized between them in the crotch of a tree.

Rhine might have saved all the scrawled messages he had gotten. Gabe recalled he had written one about Frenchy Montel being bushwhacked, and one about Hale Manning's hanging party. There were several about the kind of iron Gabe had worked out to blotch the MM Connected brand. Gabe had liked the way he'd figured that out, and had put up quite a brag about it.

Then there were different tallies of MM Connected stock. Rhine was particular about that, because he was afraid he might get trimmed out of some of the take. Anything like that might put a hangnoose around a man's neck. But a man wouldn't hang onto stuff like that fifteen years—or would he?

The twinge of anxiety grew as he waddled toward the post. He muttered profanely at the thought that a man could be so sneaky and crafty as to hang onto something like that for so long. It just showed what human nature had come to.

Without a look, he stalked past Rusty Shute, who had stayed outside at the tierail to keep off stray dogs. He didn't even look at the tarp-covered figure on the claybank lead pony. Hacker was still inside talking to Captain Horn, but the talk petered out the minute Gabe showed up. Gabe gave the Circle Cross owner an ugly glare. "I'll talk to the captain private."

Hacker got up. "Whatever you say, Gabe. I've told him what I think we should do."

"It's all up to me, ain't it?" Gabe flared. He was still winded after the beating he had given Rhine. He slid into the chair Hacker vacated, gulping in air.

Captain Horn had an anxious look on his face. His thinking apparatus was grooved by Army discipline, and when he got outside the pattern of it he floundered. What Hacker had told him about hushing the whole thing up made sense, in a way; but he had trouble bringing himself to see all the angles in a situation like this.

And, first of all, Gabe Galtus had to be persuaded that it was the best thing to do. He expressed his regrets at what had happened, and explained Hacker's idea. "Hacker says a Circle Cross puncher will shoulder the blame, that is, if you agree not to go gunning for him."

"Is that so?" Gabe muttered.

The captain smiled briefly, and went on to say that this Circle Cross puncher and Gabe's son had had trouble down in Outlaw Wells. A shoot-out between them would look reasonable and would be more or less expected.

"You talkin' about Coe Manning?" Gabe hazarded a guess.

"Yes, that's the name. Of course, as I said, we're trying to do this because there's a girl involved. Uh—under the circumstances, it seems to me you would be glad to cooperate."

"Mebbe I would," Gabe said. "It depends."

Captain Horn breathed a little easier. "I'm sure it will be to the best interests of everyone. I'll get Mrs. Bascom in and talk to her about it. I'm sure she'll see it's the reasonable thing to do. Anything to keep the Kiowas quiet."

Gabe perked up suddenly. "What they got to do with it?"

"Why—uh—the girl, of course. She's more or less one of them, and—"

"She is?"

"Why yes. You know that."

"Do I?"

"As a matter of fact, Coe Manning's going to marry her. At least it's in the wind. If that's true, it ought to be very easy to hush this whole thing up, so the Kiowas won't get stirred."

GABE chewed on this bit of information for some time. It was almost as though all the forces of doom were gathering to-

gether against him, either by accident or by design. The sleeping dogs were beginning to snarl back. One dog was looking bigger than all the rest—Coe Manning.

Gabe thought it over this way and that, took the captain's measure among other things, and then gradually arrived at his conclusion. "You're getting your girls mixed up, Cap'n," he stated, finally. "That Towhee girl wasn't mixed up in it."

"No?"

"No. I told you mebbe I'd play along with you someway, but I don't want nothin' pushed down my throat, see?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I kin tell you. I happen to know what girl Luke tooken out there in the dark last night."

"Why, of course, we all do, but—"

"You do, eh?"

"Certainly."

"Name her."

"I have, sir." The captain bristled a little at Gabe's tone.

"She ain't the one—in my book."

"Well, who do you think it was?"

"I know, cap'n. It was Miss Horn—Miss Laura Horn."

Captain Horn's mouth came open, and he gulped soundlessly. Anger and dismay fought it out inside of him. "You—you're mistaken, Mr. Galtus," he got out, finally. "Laura wouldn't—wouldn't—"

"She wouldn't go ridin' with Luke, is that what you mean?" Gabe flared.

"Oh, no, but—"

"Listen, I said mebbe I'd cooperate, but I don't want any beatin' around the bush. If you want to cover up murder, I'll say how it's to be done."

"We aren't trying to cover up murder, Mr. Galtus. We're trying to cover up a ruthless attack on a girl who—"

"Git your girl over here. I'll talk to her."

"Why—why, yes. Of course. Uh—"

Captain Horn sent an orderly. It took only a few moments. Laura walked past the window, and along the tie-rail without looking to right or left. She came inside. Captain Horn studied her face as she walked toward him, and his stomach suddenly twisted up into a tight knot and wouldn't ease up.

"Laura, this is Mr. Galtus," he said. "His son, Luke, was killed last night. He says—" his voice faltered, and he couldn't go on.

"Did you go ridin' with him last night?" Gabe asked with a stubborn scowl.

"Oh, no. No, I didn't. Why, I—I don't even know him." Her hands twisted together. She glanced out the window; then, with a visible shudder, she pulled her eyes back.

"My boy, Clint, says—" Gabe began.

"I don't care what anybody says," she swung on him with a tortured look. "I—I didn't do it."

"Laura," Captain Horn breathed.

She sagged into a chair, and wilted. There was a long silence. Gabe had sense enough to wait, and what he wanted to hear finally came. "I had to do it," she breathed. "He—he—I couldn't help it. I'm so sick of this place I could scream. I didn't care what happened, that's why I went. At least I thought I didn't. But when he began pawing me, I—I shot him." Her voice drifted off to nothing. She shuddered again.

The captain's shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes. Gabe was still doing some figuring, planning how he could put this information to good use.

"I had that little gun you gave me, dad," Laura went on at last. "I—I didn't know whether I hit him or not. I didn't know until this morning when I rode out to look. I saw them bringing him in."

"Murder," Gabe muttered. "Plain murder."

Captain Horn tried to pull himself together. Hacker had been mistaken about the identity of the girl. Even though Laura was entirely blameless, the scandal and shame would stay with her as long as she lived. He had seen it happen before, and he knew what he had to do.

"You are to say nothing about this, Laura," he told her. "It won't go any further than this. We can hush it up, because there are certain circumstances that make it possible. You may go now, Laura."

After she had left, Gabe said, carefully: "I don't know what kind of talk you un'erstand, Horn, but, like I said, mebbe I kin cooperate."

"What do you want?" Captain Horn asked, without looking up.

"Nothin' a-tall, Horn," Gabe answered. "I guess we all agree that Coe Manning done it. You kin tell Hacker I'm cooperatin'. You're the kingpin around here, Horn. What you say goes. You say Coe Manning killed my boy, Luke, and I'm going gunning for him. All you got to do is leave it that way." With that, he went out the door.

Rusty was still at the tie-rail, and he moved back against the wall when he saw Gabe come out. Hacker was across the street, watching from there. Gabe didn't give either of them a look or say a word. He untied the claybank, swung it around, and walked it down the street with its tarp-covered load.

CHAPTER FIVE

Whipsawed!

COE MANNING returned to Mobeetie the next morning. Towhee and Mrs. Bascom came with him, the latter on a long-poled drag or travois, made of green wood that had a lot of give. She had a painful wound in her side, just above the hip, and they made a slow and careful return.

Coe had a curious feeling about all this. There was a heartfelt urgency inside him, and a deep concern, as if the three of them were kith and kin, unquestioningly obliged to each other without spoken word. He liked the way Towhee spoke her mind, as if expecting of him whatever was necessary. The night had built this up between them, and he hoped it would last forever. They were like a family, fortifying each other against every circumstance.

The post medico was a sergeant roughly skilled in the particular kind of ailments and injuries that were apt to beset a frontier post. Coe got the notion that Mrs. Bascom was in good hands, and when he had done all he could to help, he left Towhee with her, and moved up the empty street. The clerk in the agency office told him Rhine hadn't come in. Coe went to his home, but didn't find Rhine. What he saw put a worried frown across his forehead.

The door had been ripped off its hinges, and the solidly-built place ransacked from end to end. The ticking on the bunk had been ripped open, and the contents scattered. Papers, blankets, and clothing, were strewn about the place. The padlock had been pried off a strongbox, and the box itself was battered to pieces.

Coe didn't know much about Rhine, except what Mrs. Bascom had told him before Taw Hueling showed up with his tough gunhawks. He knew now that Rhine had been the crooked banker in Outlaw Wells at the time his father and Frenchy Montel had lost the MM Connected place, and that somehow Rhine had been in on the crooked deal. Coe meant to brace him, and force the truth out of him with threat of exposure, but, from the evidence before him, it looked like he might be too late.

He went outside again, and saw Captain Horn, stiff and precise, marching toward his office. The girl who had ridden out to meet them when they took Luke Galtus to town was with him. Coe lifted his hat, and stopped them. He had to make himself known to the captain.

When he did, he got a curious reaction. At first the captain stared blankly, then his face turned white, and he had to swallow several times before he could say a word. "I—I thought you left with Mrs. Bascom," he got out, finally. "Hacker said—"

"We had to come back," Coe said. "Mrs. Bascom got hurt."

"Where is she now?" Laura Horn spoke up.

Coe pointed.

"Oh, I'll go over there, and see if I can help," Laura said. She seemed glad to get away.

The captain waited until she was out of hearing. "Manning, that talk we had with Galtus didn't turn out as well as we hoped. I—I'll have another talk with him today, but you've got to leave immediately. Go back to camp, and—"

"I've got to see Carter Rhine."

"Let it go until later. I'll let you know how things turn out."

"I may be too late already, captain," Coe said. "I was just over at his place. Somebody wrecked it, and Rhine ain't anywhere around."

The captain looked startled, but he didn't offer any explanation. "I'll look into it," he promised.

"Where's Gabe now?" Coe asked.

"I—I don't know. He and Clint buried Luke last night just before dark. I haven't

seen them since. Maybe you can find—"

"That deal Hacker thought up didn't suit them?"

"No, it didn't." The captain's face drew into a tight knot. "They think you killed Luke. We thought we could straighten it out some way while you were gone. I—I'll try again today. I'll do something."

"What do you suppose happened to Rhine?"

"I don't know," Captain Horn muttered, with a distracted look. "I'll tend to that, too."

"When did you see him last?"

Captain Horn frowned and thought back. "He came in with Mr. Hacker. Then he went to the bar over there to get Galtus. I—I believe he stayed there."

Coe went on, leaving the captain mumbling helplessly to himself. The bar was closed. Coe put his hand against the glass to stop the glare, and looked in. He thought he saw someone duck down behind the bar, but he wasn't sure.

A second later, the window shattered in his face, and a bullet whined off into space. Coe went down to his knees. The glass had cut his hands and face, but he wasn't seriously hurt. He shook the sparkling shards from his clothes and crawled off the gallery.

THERE was a patch of high weeds alongside the building, and he crawled through them, hugging the building so he could safely pass the windows. The rear door was bolted, too, but he heard a man talking inside.

It was Clint Galtus, making a brag that he had downed Coe with one shot. "I seen him come up the street and poke his snout against the window. I let him have it. He went down with one shot."

He was talking to Gabe who seemed to be in an ugly mood. He wouldn't believe Clint had actually downed Coe with one shot. "Hell, you ain't good enough," he told his son. "You got to take about five to hit anything once."

"He went down like a stuck pig."

Coe couldn't figure out why they had holed up inside. He expected Gabe would take a look on the gallery to see for himself what Clint had done. Gabe said as much, but before he got around to it, there was another sound, a low, agonized wail, like the howl of a sick dog. Gabe cussed viciously, and then Coe heard the thud of his fist, and the wailing stopped.

"Dammit," Clint growled. "The minute he comes to, you knock him cold. How you goin' to git anywhere like that."

"I'll make him talk," Gabe snarled.

"We been at it all night," Clint snapped back. "He's goin' to croak even on us first thing you know."

"Well, let him croak."

"Rhine!" Clint called several times.

Coe heard him slapping with the flat of his hand.

Then he heard Clint. "He's done for."

Gabe cussed again. Then there was an interval of silence. Finally, Gabe said, in a relieved voice: "Give him some water. I'll go see out front."

Coe rattled the door, and raised his voice. "What's goin' on in there?" he called out. "Open up."

He didn't wait for an answer. It was only a way to hold them at the door while he raced around the building again. He went in through the broken window. He got in safely, and ducked behind the bar. The door he had rattled was swinging open.

Gabe stood in front of it, gun leveled, inviting Coe to come in, but he didn't get an answer. He finally stepped out, careful as a cat in the wet, and told Clint to go around the front.

Coe followed the sound of his footsteps. When they came close he stood up. "I'm right here," he spoke up.

Clint pulled up, as if a long rope had jerked him back on his heels. He swallowed hard before he could find his voice. When he finally found it he couldn't think of anything to say. He turned carefully and started backing off.

"Don't go too far," Coe told him. "Like Gabe says, you're not much of a shot."

Clint was rattled and fear jumped at him pushing him back regardless. He wanted to get out of the way of lead, and still every step he took spoiled his own chances of coming through alive. He knew it, but he couldn't stand his ground.

He managed to get off the first shot, however, throwing it fast and wild, so it snapped against the back bar mirror, pulling down another shower of glass. He tried to get off another, but Coe's bullet struck

him in the heart before he could trigger the gun. It folded him like a dried-up weed, and toppled him to the floor.

Gabe came clattering back. He saw Clint go down, and came around behind the bar from the rear end, hoping to get Coe in a whipsaw if Clint had stuck it out. He blocked the space completely.

His first shot was low, and went through the bandage Towhee had wrapped around Coe's leg. It gave him a hard jerk and almost flung him down. He didn't feel any pain, and it didn't spoil his shot. He saved it until he had steadied himself, and then let go.

Gabe staggered under the impact, and one fat pudgy hand went to the bar to brace him. He had trouble leveling off his gun, and his face screwed up with the effort. But before he could get it off, he lurched, and the bullet hit the floor, gouging a hole. Then it whined to the ceiling, passing within an inch of Coe's skull.

Gabe took Coe's last shot square in the chest. It brought out a horrible sound through his throat, and his pudgy hand slid limply along the bar. Then he crashed flat on his face to the floor.

No man could really blame Captain Horn for not telling Coe exactly how things stood. The blame he took on himself when Laura finally told him the truth was more than many a man could bear. All things aren't black or white, and a man must look at the colors between to get at the real values.

Hacker said in some ways he thought more of the captain than he had before. "It's the same way with Rhine," he stated. "He stood up against Gabe the whole damned night, taking punishment that you and I can't say we took. You seen his fingernails, the way they were ripped. You seen the cigarette holes in his hands. It killed him in the end, but he stuck it out until he could tell us about these papers."

"Yeah," Coe agreed, "he could have saved himself from all that deviltry if he'd just owned up where they were. That's all Gabe was after."

"He did it to spite Gabe."

"Mebbeso," Hacker conceded, "but he did it. That's enough for me."

"Well, if everybody's so damned good," Rusty muttered, "what about Gabe and Clint?"

"Well, there," Hacker admitted freely, "you got a pair of plain hydrophoby skunks."

Rhine had had the papers in his boots in a soft leather pocket that fitted snugly against his leg. Even with them handy like that he had held out against his two tormentors the whole night long. It was something to think about and wonder at.

Hacker had looked the package over, and had told Coe he would get back the MM Connected. "As far as the land is concerned, it may have to go to court, but I ain't sure about that. We'll see when we git back to Outlaw Wells. The stock is yours right now, without no lawin'. You're only takin' back what he stolen off'n you, and I figure it'll run to a big thing. He was always cagy about what he had, but it couldn't be less than thirty thousand head."

"Whew!" Coe breathed. He looked at Towhee, who was riding beside him on the way back to the Brazos bottoms. He told her they were rich.

"Is that so?" she said, quietly. "Well, I don't mind, if it pleases you."

"I can give you anything you want," Coe bragged.

"You want to remember, young feller," Hacker put in, "half of it's hers."

Towhee shook her head, and laughed a little. "All I want is you, Coe. I don't want any cows."

Hacker laughed. Towhee flushed a little. Coe took her hand and told her Hacker was an old fool. "Don't you ever go holdin' back when you want to say somethin' nice to me," he told her.

Hacker still had one more problem on his mind. "Mebbe I don't need to remind you," he said, "but all that beef's got the Three Arrows brand on it, and I don't see how you're goin' to change it back to the MM Connected. You can't take those wings off."

"Well," Coe said, after considering it a moment. "We can add a couple more M's."

"Yeah," Hacker agreed, "you can do that. But they won't mean anything. There's only the two of you."

"I see what you mean," Coe said, with a slow drawl. Then his eyes settled on Towhee again. "Maybe we can change that, too."

THE END

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(Continued from page 41)

fire, the sheriff wouldn't be able to touch him here.

After supper, he sat staring gloomily into the fire, a burned-out quirly forgotten between his fingers. Here he had a fortune in his hands, only to have it jerked away from him by the conniving, underhanded trickery of two low-lifes. His daydreams of a few hours before came back to him, daydreams of wealth, prestige, fame.

"Arrrrh!" he growled, and threw his cigarette into the fire.

He looked up as he heard the unintelligible muttering from Dumbo, who was seated on the other side of the fire. Dumbo was composing again. But that wasn't what made Hashhouse r'ar to his feet, surprise pushing his eyebrows up his forehead. "Phwat in the name of Erin would ye be doin'?" he gasped, moving around the fire beside Dumbo.

Dumbo looked up vacantly. He said, "Aw," then hesitated a moment, leaned back on his haunches, closed his eyes and recited in a high, schoolboy voice:

"Hashhouse Hannigan is a turrible nice man.
But he was sad, 'cause no gold was in his pan.
So Dumbo made some gold, 'an put it inna ground
Where he was purty shore that it'd be found.
But I guess that Dumbo didn't do it right,
'Cause Hashhouse is still purty sad tonight."

Holding his breath, Hashhouse leaned down, looked hard at the bandana spread across Dumbo's lap. It was covered with a yellow snow of what looked for all the world like flake gold. In one hand, Dumbo held one of the brass doorknobs from Jess Ludz's Golden Wheel Restaurant. In the other hand he held a course file. The doorknob was severely mutilated, having had several ounces of brass flakes filed off it.

Hashhouse straightened, a gentle grin suffering his face. "Dumbo, me lad," he said softly, as one hand fingered the eight thousand dollar roll of bills in his pocket, "the very next town we come to, I'm buyin' ye a whole domned wagon load of doorknobs, so help me."

COMEBACK OF THE CROSSFIRE KID

(Continued from page 56)

Joe Hatchet. You know we plastered the West with posters."

"I thought you wanted me for killin' old Ban," Joe explained. "I never knew 'til now he didn't die."

"It was all a terrible mistake," said Pres Moran. "When I knew they were in here, a-tryin' to get into the safe, I hadda come and fight 'em. I'm no fighter, son."

Tears sprang from Joe's eyes. He sat, dazed, staring at the old man who had saved his money. The doctor came back and said briskly, "All right. Let me have him. He's not bad hurt."

"I—I thought he was dead," said the girl.

"So—so did I," said Joe. Together they went to where Ban Snare was sitting in his swivel chair.

Ban Snare muttered, "Always talkin' about you, Joe. I knew. I tried everything honorable—and sometimes mebbe I wasn't fair. But she wouldn't marry me. Always somethin' about Joe Hatchet and where did I think he was. Got a box in that safe for yuh, Joe, you varmint."

Joe said, "Ban, I—I been wrong for years."

"T' hell with that. You saved us tonight. Didn't have time to take your advice. Lotta money in that safe. Horne knew it. Forty thousand of yours—always been there. Dad told me 'bout it. Tried to find you."

Joe said, "Ban, I wish I could tell you."

"Bought Cross Bar," said the big man. His grin was brave. "Thought Lucy might want it. She didn't. Not with me in it. Reckon I take up too much room."

Lucy said, "Ban, I like you so much. You've always been so good to me."

"Marry Joe and lemme visit yuh," said Ban. "Me and Joe—we allus been buds, ain't we, Joe?" His eyes closed and he snored under the sedative.

Lucy said, "Oh, he shouldn't have said that. We hardly know each other."

Joe said, "Lucy, let's get out of here. I never did kill a man before. I don't like consortin' with their corpuses."

He had to fight hard to control his stomach. They went out and walked down Mesa Street to her house which he remembered so well.

THE END

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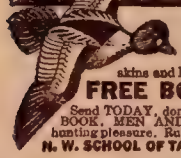

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(Continued from page 72)

angry men and women pounded up the street, headed for Long John's house with a rope in their hands. They flung explanations over their shoulders.

"Roof fell in!"

"Hull dern house collapsed!"

"Side wall fell on top of me!"

"Went right through the floor, I did!"

Few noticed the wizened carpenter, rolling and writhing on the ground in an ecstasy of pure joy, chortling and weeping with hysterical amusement. No one ever quite figured out how he had managed to erect his shoddy structures so that they would all collapse at precisely the same moment. And when the early rays of the sun revealed the once-trim new homes, flattened like mushrooms, Waldo wisely wasn't around to tell them.

Reputations traveled slowly in those days, however, and soon Waldo had come to rest in the new, booming Wyoming county seat of Podville. Here, his El Paso success story was repeated all over again. He amused himself by becoming something of a petty tyrant. No one could ever be sure, when they placed an order with him, just what would be produced. An order for a simple flight of back stairs for a stable might result in a sweeping, carved and posted stairway that would have graced a governor's mansion. A demand for a new bell steeple on the schoolhouse was filled with an authentic copy of a Turkish minaret that towered thirty feet high and could be seen for twenty miles.

Since Waldo was the only skilled carpenter within 300 miles, Podville had little choice, and in May, 1866, he received a contract to build a new courthouse.

WALDO was still pounding away at the finishing touches in June when, as it happened, young Jed Simmons, then sheriff of Wyoming county, captured and brought in for trial the troublesome highway bandit Frank Crawford and two members of his gang. Podville posses had been chasing Crawford for nearly four years and the population was anxious to see a good hanging trial proceed at once. Justice was stymied, however, by the fact that Waldo had torn down the old courthouse in order to get wood for the new one and the new one was not quite finished. But Waldo

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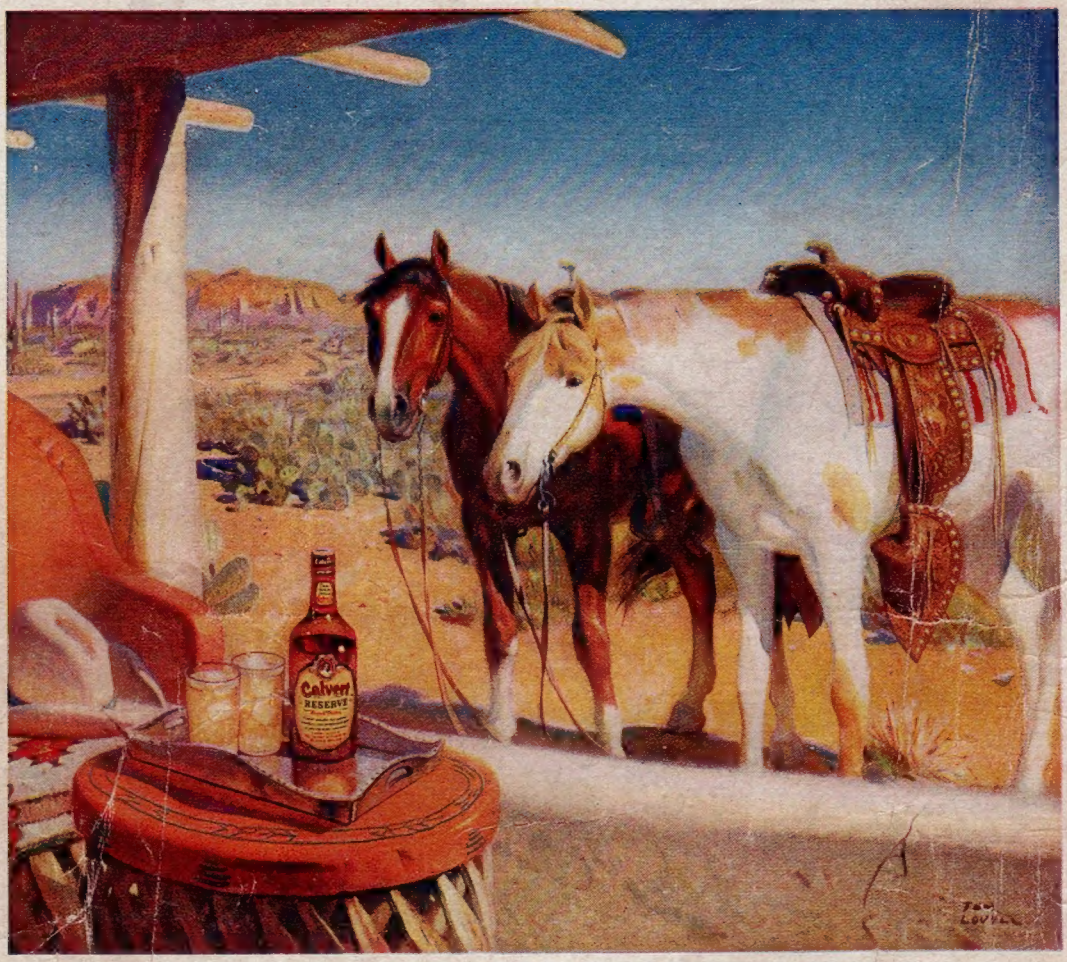

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